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SANCHO PEDRO, THE BOY BANDIT; Or, THE FIGHTING PARDS
OF SIERRA FLAT.

BY MAJOR E. L. ST. VRAIN.



"GIVE ME YOUR SECRET, OR I WILL LANCH THE JAGUAR UPON YOU!" AND SANCHO POINTED AT THE WAITING BEAST.

Sancho Pedro, THE BOY BANDIT;

OR,

The Fighting Pards of Sierra Flat.

BY MAJOR R. L. ST. VRAIN.

CHAPTER I.

THE ROAD-AGENT APPEARS.

ROCKY PASS is one of the wildest, most imposing gaps that cut the mountains of California, and at the time of which we write it was as wicked as it was wild. Yet, it was the only way by which people could go and come from Sierra Flat, and the people who had business there could only put their trust in Providence, take Mike Malone's stage, and try their luck.

One afternoon as the stage neared Rocky Pass, after crossing Lucky Level, one of the passengers suddenly aroused from deep thought. "Gentlemen, how are you 'heeled?'" he demanded.

There was a general start, for there was no knowing what such an inquiry heralded.

"Wa-al, I reckon I am heeled as wal as any galoot in Californie," replied a broad-shouldered miner, as he threw open his coat and showed a row of revolvers and knives in his belt.

"I—I carry a firearm," faltered a pale man in seedy black clothes.

"Why do you ask?" demanded another pilgrim, looking at the first speaker.

"Because we are now approaching dangerous ground. Rocky Pass is the favorite working ground of Sancho Pedro, the road-agent, and we are liable to be pulled up before we see the valley of our hopes. I mention this because I perceive that I am the only resident of Sierra Flat in the party."

"Mercy! is there really danger?" asked the pale-faced man.

"There really is."

"Let it come, a-hootin'," said the big miner, defiantly. "Ef ther is war, so much the merrier. I say it, an' I'm Buck Brazer, from Leadville."

"That reminds me," said the first speaker, "that it would be well for us to introduce ourselves and give such further information as we may deem best. This is a world of uncertainty—"

"That's ther idee!" interrupted Brazer. "I've allays said it myself—we don't know now whether we are on ther up-side or ther down-side o' ther farmament. Et's all onsartin!"

He heaved a deep sigh, and then solaced himself by a liberal quantity of tobacco.

"We may none of us outlive this journey," continued the man who lived at Sierra Flat, "and if we were to give our names and addresses, it might be the means of breaking our fate to our friends. I am named Horace Allenton."

"An' I'm Buck Brazer, from Leadville, as you may hev heerd me remark afore," said the miner.

"I—I am Theodore Strout, late of Columbus, Ohio, and a naturalist by profession," said the pale man.

The next man gave his name as Alfred Lyman, but the fifth, and last, of the inside travelers, had to be aroused from a heavy sleep before he could explain that he was Ezekiel Higgins, a life-insurance agent from nowhere in particular.

"That is all attended to," said Mr. Allenton, with a sigh of relief.

"Thar's two more outside with Mike Malone," said Brazer.

"Bah! only two boys, and one of them a ducky," was the indifferent reply.

"Wal, I reckon they are more likely ter hev a mar'n than sech ole sinners like us. I say likely ter hev, fur in this world o' unsartinty, we never kin tell which side is up. Ther Jehu is pullin' up fur water; I'll git out an' speechify ther kids."

They were at the portals of Rocky Pass, and though they had just passed a mile of comparative level, were about to enter the gloomy walls of the gap. Dark and frowning was the way ahead; a place in which lurked Sancho Pedro and his robbers of the road.

Brazer looked at the box passengers.

They were, as he had said, boys, neither being more than eighteen, but they were well-developed young fellows and looked wide-awake.

In one respect they differed greatly, for while one was of clear white blood, the other was a very black-skinned negro.

Buck Brazer explained the danger which they might encounter, and the provision they had made against a sudden death, and though the boys looked a little doubtful, they gave their names—the white boy claiming to be Edgar Benson, and the black one, John Jones.

Buck clambered back into the stage and the vehicle rolled on more rapidly than before.

"If any of you have valuables, you had better secrete them," said Allenton, gravely.

"I hain't got a dollar," said Higgins.

"Nor I," said Lyman.

"Nor me," said Buck, "but, I'm heeled."

He pointed significantly to the weapons in his belt.

Allenton's eyes were on Mr. Strout, but he did not testify as to his financial condition. He seemed in a state of great nervousness, and each glance at the bleak walls of the pass added to his dismay.

"Who is this yer Sancho Pedro?" Brazer asked.

"A road-agent of the worst type. He is young—under twenty, they say—but a perfect demon for cruelty. He has been known to attach a horse to each limb of a prisoner and pull him in pieces if he did not surrender his gold."

Strout groaned audibly, Brazer looked to his revolvers, Lyman remained impassive, but Higgins winked at the last speaker.

He plainly considered the statement a fabrication, and from the glance he directed toward Strout, seemed pretty sure that Allenton was trying to harass that timid man.

If such was his intention, he succeeded to a charm, for the naturalist shivered and seemed to see an outlaw in every point of rock they passed.

Outside, there was no talk about danger. Mike Malone knew what was liable to occur and kept his eyes open, but he did not consider it worth his time to explain to the young men who kept him company on the box.

The latter had been strangers to each other when the stage left Apple Head, but Edgar Benson was not at all troubled with false pride, and he had chatted freely with the colored youth.

Jones was going to Sierra Flat because he had received an offer from a rich mine-owner there, as he freely stated, but Benson only explained that he "wanted to see the country."

Just as the bottom of an ascent was reached, the somber walls of the pass suddenly showed signs of life. Out from the niches rode a dozen men, all masked save one, and this ominous-looking band at once placed themselves in the middle of the road.

"Hold on! Pull up there, and rest, Mike Malone!"

The order came sharply from the one unmasked man, and while the driver obediently halted, Benson and Jones looked in surprise.

It seemed as though some old Italian bandit had suddenly sprung into existence, in a more youthful form, as suited to the young land of gold, for the last speaker was like a walking arsenal robed in silk and satin.

His style of dress seemed wholly out of place in so wild a country, being composed for the most part of a velveteen substance, with a bright-hued blanket, or *serape*, floating back from his shoulders, and a brigand-like hat above all which was both wild and showy.

Such a person would be deemed a mere masquerader in the East, but a Western man needed only to look at the array of weapons in his belt to be sure that there were claws behind the velvet.

As we have seen, all the other men seemed to follow this gay fellow who did not care to mask his face, and yet he was only about twenty years of age.

"Wal, hyar we be, as yez may perceiye," said Mike Malone. "Phat's ther tax ter-day?"

"What's your cargo?"

"Five inside and these two beauties."

Mike pointed to his box passengers.

"Well, I hope we won't delay you long. I will proceed with business at once. Here, you black imp, get down and hold my horse!"

The last words were addressed to John Jones. "I'm jest as much obleeged ter you, sah, but I ain't holdin' hosses, this week," answered John, with a calm smile.

"No words about it, confound it! or I'll blow out your eyes. You hear me? Come down off that box, and do as I say. Start!"

"Do it," said Mike, hurriedly; "that thar is Sancho Pedro, ther road-agent, an' he'll blow dhe hape av us ter glory if yez git his mad up."

"When I want a job ob dat kind, sah, I'll

apply for it, but I ain't a candidate now. You've got sarvints ob yer own, an' you had better call dem up to de dough-dish," said John Jones, serenely.

Sancho Pedro drew a revolver with a jerk, his face full of fury, but at that moment the stage door was opened from the inside, and Allenton's head appeared.

"Hollo! hollo! what's the trouble here?" he asked.

"Tumble out and see," Sancho Pedro replied, quickly. "You've got a call and you mustn't be bashful. Out with you, and bring all your brethren under your wing."

"Gracious heavens!" ejaculated Allenton, "we may as well give up our thoughts of resistance; they are more than three times our number."

"What of that?" Lyman demanded. "Five bullets will lessen the odds. Come, who is with me for a fight?"

"If mild means won't dew, I am just yeour huckleberry," said Higgins.

"Mild means!" Would you parley with those fellows? No; give them powder and lead, and plenty of it. What do you say, Brazer?"

"I cave, I cave!" the miner muttered. "They have ther drop on us, dead gone sure."

Lyman looked at him with contempt, but just then the voice of Sancho Pedro again arose, this time angrily.

CHAPTER II.

SOMETHING MISSING.

"COME, tumble out inside there!" said Sancho Pedro, impatiently. "I hate a slow poke, and want to see you once more on your way. Do I see you moving?"

He carelessly cocked his revolver, while the masked men stood all around the stage. Mike Malone helped himself to a fresh chew of tobacco and sat calmly on the box, apparently wholly at his ease.

"Who is this fellow?" asked young Benson, turning to the placid Jehu.

"He's dher boss av Rocky Pass, an' a bad man wid dher irons. Sancho Pedro is his name, an' he takes toll all along this road. Fork over peac'ble an' save throuble. Dhat's dher advice av an honest man."

Benson eyed the robber keenly. He read him easily—a sharp, reckless young dare-devil, lawless and puffed up by inglorious authority, a man with a dandyish exterior and a heart all bad.

He toyed with his revolvers, giving the inside passengers time to consult, for some strange reason, but, as careless as he seemed, it was evident to Benson that he was watching all keenly.

"Golly!" said John Jones, "dis am a adwentur' in dead 'arnest. I's hearn ob road-adjutants afore, but I neber 'spected to see one. Shall you fight?"

"Hush! go slowly and softly, my colored friend. We are boys, and must take our cue from those inside; but if they show their teeth, I shall certainly bark. Are you armed?"

"Got a revolver in my pocket."

"I've a pair of them. Lie low, and if it comes to a brush, show your teeth and howl."

Evidently, the inside passengers had lost their "sand." They began piling out of the stage, one by one, with Allenton and Brazer at their head. These two men, who had talked war so fiercely when danger was first mentioned, looked thoroughly cowed.

Next came Lyman, angry at the surrender though he would lose but little by it; then Higgins, as bland and calm as though nothing was wrong.

"There is one more," said Sancho Pedro. "Pull him out, somebody. Here, Crowfoot, search the burrow."

Poor Mr. Strout was introduced to society without any ceremony, and then the robbers had their prisoners all at the front. Every one, including Mike Malone and the boys, was covered, and the time of resistance was past.

Then they were searched, one by one, beginning with Allenton and ending with the box-passengers. Sancho Pedro looked puzzled and angry. The gain had been small, very small.

He spoke to his men and they went through Strout again, examining the lining of all his garments. Vain labor! nothing more was found.

Sancho Pedro looked perplexed and eyed his prisoners, one after another, in a keen manner which heralded wrath to come.

"Look here gents," he suddenly said, "some of you are not acting on the square. You haven't panned out for all you are worth."

"You've took fifty per cent. o' my 'arthly valuables," said Brazer, mournfully. "You've

got my weepers an' I only have my wardrobe left."

"I have reason to believe that there is treachery here," declared Sancho Pedro, with as much indignation as though he was a custom-house official. "In plain language, there is an article somewhere in this crowd that I want, and I am going to have it. Come, now, life is worth more than earthly goods; deliver your valuables and go on your way rejoicing."

Higgins was the only man that moved. He slowly put his hand to his mouth and removed a set of false teeth.

"Maybe, that air is the subject of dispute," he mildly observed.

Sancho Pedro stamped angrily on the hard ground.

"Fool! you have chosen a bad subject for trifling," he said. "Put away your effigy or I'll drive it down your throat."

Higgins meekly obeyed, while the young outlaw looked his prisoners over again. He was trying to discover one who appeared guilty, or alarmed, or to be hiding a secret, but he looked in vain.

Edgar Benson began to feel in a belligerent mood. From the first, he had disapproved of this tame surrender, but he was but a boy, comparatively speaking, and had not raised his voice to protest.

Nevertheless, he was a firm believer in the right of self-government and self-defense, and it annoyed him a good deal to see Sancho Pedro have his own way when the stage had contained seven men besides the driver.

He now spoke to Buck Brazer, who stood on his left.

"Can't something be done?" he asked.

"What d'ye mean?"

"Are we to stand here and be plucked like turkeys?"

"Wal, I reckon we are about plucked already. Ther durned critters hev got all but my pants an' shirts."

"Can't we resist?"

"Resist? Lord love yer, no! Ther idee is insanity in ther fust degree. We ain't got a weepion now. Dry up, afore ther t'other critter hears yer."

Edgar relapsed into silence, but he was far from being reconciled to his fate. He was of a brave, honest nature, as reluctant to submit to an indignity as he was to inflict one, and Sancho Pedro's way was not pleasant.

The latter, however, had only begun. He had stopped the stage with a purpose which reached beyond a pocketful of money, and that he was not disposed to give up his undertaking was soon shown.

"I plainly perceive that you fellows need the rod of correction," he observed, "and I'll be shot if I don't give you a stomachful. Mike Malone, drive on!"

"Sartin, me darlint; watch an' see me go," the driver cheerfully replied.

He gathered up his reins, and Ezekiel Higgins made a move toward the stage-door, but Sancho Pedro spoke sharply:

"Halt! One step more, and out go your brains. Stand where you are."

"But—but—but," stammered Allenton, "the stage is about to start."

"True; but you are not. The stage goes; the pilgrims stay. I have room for you all in my nest among the mountains."

A moment of dead silence followed, as the "pilgrims" comprehended his meaning, and then at least half of them lifted up their voices in entreaty; but Mike Malone cracked his whip, and the stage rolled away, leaving the luckless seven in the road-agent's grasp.

"It's your own stupidity," he fretfully said. "I don't want you at the 'Nest,' as I call my home, but I am compelled to take you there. Some one of you has that in his possession that which I will secure if I have to bind you all to the rack and pull you limb from limb!"

This blood-curdling assertion produced fresh consternation among the prisoners, and Allenton and Strout seemed completely unmanned. The others, including the boys, were outwardly calm, though far from being at their ease.

Young and dandyish as Sancho Pedro was, he had an expression which proved that he was no trifter.

He spoke to his men and they advanced and proceeded to tie the hands and bandage the eyes of the prisoners. Of course there was a good deal of protesting, but it was breath thrown away, while, having surrendered their own arms, they could not very well resist with the muzzles of gleaming revolvers looking them in the face.

The work was soon accomplished, and then

the road-agents tarried no longer. They compelled their captives to turn around several times, in order to confuse them, and then the start was made for the "Nest."

An hour of climbing and stumbling over rocks followed, but none of the prisoners could tell where they went. In fact, Sancho Pedro led them around about the canyons, often passing the same point twice, merely for the purpose of confusing them.

If they ever went out among free men again, he did not intend that they should be able to lead the way back to the "Nest."

At last the air about them changed and they knew they had entered a cave of some kind, but they were still led forward for five minutes. Then they paused, and the distant murmur of voices indicated that the outlaws were in consultation.

Edgar Benson suddenly felt a touch on his arm.

"I say, is dat you?" inquired the voice of John Jones.

"I think so," Edgar answered.

"Are we gwine ter be shut up like bu'glars?"

"Well, I don't know. It may be that, or, perhaps, they will burn us at the stake, or fit a rope round our necks," said Benson coolly.

"I'm in favor of fightin'."

"Well, why don't you fight?"

"My hands are tied."

"Well, I wouldn't let so small a thing as that upset me. We are now in the heart of the robber cave, and one man could probably clear out the whole crowd."

Edgar spoke with a sarcasm, for the tame surrender in the pass had annoyed him. Boy that he was, he had knocked around the world a good deal and learned to give as well as take; and he was well aware that the seven stage pilgrims might have made matters hot for Sancho Pedro.

"I ketches on to de solemnity ob de 'casion," said John, "but dis darky don't hanker to be shut up in dis hole by a road-adjutant. Tell you what, let's fight ef we get a chance. What say?"

Before Benson could answer the outlaws approached, and he was roughly taken by the arm and led apart from the other prisoners.

What new misfortune awaited him?

CHAPTER III.

A CHANCE FOR FREEDOM.

EDGAR was led forward for several minutes, and then, when he was halted, the bandage was removed from his eyes.

Evidently, he was in Sancho Pedro's private room, and some effort had been made to render it more inviting than nature had created it. Overhead was a rocky ceiling, but the floor was covered with blankets, and the walls hung with curtains of red flannel—the spoil of some marauding stroke.

Two men stood beside the prisoner, while in a chair, directly before him, the young captain sat in state, calmly smoking a big pipe.

The two exchanged glances, and then Sancho Pedro nodded and smiled. He looked very pleasant, just then, and he was far from being ill-looking, but Benson, who was remarkably shrewd, suspected a trap.

"What's your name?" the road-agent asked.

"Edgar Benson, sir," the youth answered, with a politeness which had an object.

"Ah! why are you in this vicinity?"

"Your men brought me here, sir."

"I don't mean that, but why were you in the stage, where were you going and where did you come from?"

"I have been in Colorado for two years as cowboy and miner, but I struck across the country for San Francisco and concluded to look in on Sierra Flat for the fun of the thing. So far, however, I fail to see where the fun comes in."

The pleasantry was lost on Sancho Pedro. Something like a shade of suspicion crossed his face.

"I can't see why any one should go to Sierra Flat for pleasure," he bluntly said.

"Perhaps curiosity would be a better word."

"And you had no other object?"

"None whatever."

"What do you know of your fellow travelers?"

"They were all strangers to me when we took the stage."

"Did you see any of them have a package of papers?"

"No."

Sancho Pedro looked sharply at Edgar and then at vacancy in a thoughtful manner.

Just then, however, some one else entered the

place and young Benson grew astonished. A woman in the "Nest" was something he did not expect to see, while the sight of one of such a type as had appeared to him was enough to cause astonishment.

She was, apparently, not more than sixteen years of age, though sufficiently developed to appear womanly so far as form went. And a fine form was hers, as any one would have confessed. Rather below the medium height, she was plump and rugged of look, though her really pretty and vivacious face was without coarseness.

Her dress consisted of a dark-gray suit with a red jacket, regular Indian moccasins, fresh and beaded, and a profusion of jewelry on fingers, neck and ears.

Benson mutely acknowledged her about as brilliant and handsome a girl as he had ever seen; but, what was she doing in the road-agents' cave?

She at once advanced and gave her hand to Sancho Pedro.

"Welcome home," she said, in a melodious voice. "I have been so lonesome, with no one to keep me company."

"You had Dominca," the young robber answered, running his hand over her shining black hair.

"Ah! but she is old, so old. I like young people, such as my own brother."

And then she threw her arms around Sancho Pedro's neck, but he gently freed himself.

"I'll see you by-and-by, Inez," he said. "I have business now, you see. Benson, this is my sister."

The fair Inez turned her gaze upon Edgar, and he shifted his position uneasily. Her black eyes, rosy cheeks and bright smile affected him considerably, and, indeed, it was a battery to damage any young man's stoicism. Benson had passed through eighteen years of life without any very desperate love-affair, but he properly appreciated such charms as were now before him.

"Have you joined the band?" the girl cried, and Benson could not but see that her look was one of pleasure.

"No," he answered, grimly. "I only dropped in for a few minutes."

"He is a prisoner," said Sancho Pedro, coldly.

"A prisoner?" cried Inez, clasping her hands.

"Why, that is too bad. What have you done?"

"Nothing, so far, but I'm looking for a chance to run," he frankly answered.

"Well, I'm really sorry to see you here, for you are too—too—"

She paused, seeming to be confused.

"Inez expects me to toss you over a precipice or roast you by a slow fire," explained the road-agent, gravely.

"I don't approve of all you do, brother," she answered. "What has this young man done, anyway? Have you given him a chance to join the band?"

A short silence followed. Sancho Pedro looked thoughtfully at the prisoner.

"Benson," he suddenly said, "how would that idea please you?"

"To join your band?"

"Yes."

"I don't think I would like it," was the frank reply.

"You don't know the amount of fun there is in it. We have a big, comfortable cave, plenty to eat and drink, we are safe from all enemies, and money pours into your pockets. Add to this that our life is the wildest and freest on earth and you gain some idea of what we are. Now, we seldom take in new men, but I rather like your figure-head and I'll take you and give the same favors my old men receive. What do you say?"

"Tell him yes!" whispered Inez. "They are dreadful when they are angry. Join, and I'll help you all I can."

It was an alluring bait, for wild life has a charm for every one of Benson's age, while the flattering interest of Inez in his welfare was enough to turn even a cooler head, but the young man from Colorado was neither a villain nor a fool.

His natural inclinations were not of the outlaw stamp, and with a natural tendency to look for the motives of men and women through their actions, it suddenly flashed upon him that there was a deliberate trap near his feet.

It might be possible that Sancho Pedro was willing to take an utter stranger into his band and give him a chance to betray them, and it might be that Miss Inez was as deeply touched by his peril as she pretended, but Ed Benson internally decided that there was room for a doubt.

He would test the matter before deciding.

"What would be my duties?" he asked, slowly.

"Well," said the boy captain, with seeming frankness, "I need a good man to act as a sort of superintendent here in the cave. I have three Mexican servants, but they are inclined to be lazy, and some one is needed to walk over the place once or twice a day and see that all is put to rights. I would give this duty to you if you wished, but as it would occupy comparatively little time you could also go on the trail whenever you desired. In addition to this, we might at times wish you to lounge around Sierra Flat and get what news for us you could ketch on to."

Young Benson was thinking rapidly, but his thoughts were a good deal disturbed as Inez sought and pressed his hand, the movement being concealed from Sancho Pedro by her own position.

This high mark of her favor played havoc with his mental condition, for few persons are stoics at eighteen, but Benson managed to remain calm outwardly.

"They want to use me for a cat's-paw," he thought, avoiding the black eyes of the girl. "If I refuse the offer I shall be in a confounded tight corner, and so will all my friends of the stage. If I accept I can discover what Sancho Pedro wants, and also have some hope of freeing the others."

It was sensible reasoning, but Benson hesitated as he thought of the danger he would dare. It was like playing with fire. He might be shot by friend or foe before he was through with the affair, or something might occur to brand him as an outlaw before all the honest people of California.

All these thoughts had gone flashing through his mind, and he had not delayed so very long when he lifted his head and looked squarely at Sancho Pedro.

"I'm with you," he bluffedly said. "Sling out your papers and I'll sign the contract."

Another pressure of the girl's hand; an approving nod from the young captain.

"Good enough," he said. "I'm glad you have decided this way, for I believe you have good material in you, while on your own part I am sure you will never repent. The life is wild, free and jolly; no hard work or sentimentality. All goes merry as a marriage-bell with us."

"Well, if that is decided," said Inez, "I will go away. Don't change your mind, Mr. Benson, for I want the pleasure of showing you the home we have here—our 'Nest,' as we call it. I'll see you again soon."

All this time she had retained his hand, and, as she turned away, she gave a farewell pressure, threw a kiss to her brother, and glided from the room.

Benson breathed freer when she was gone. He had a brave, honest heart, but her beauty and caresses had affected him in spite of all. He did not care to think seriously of a female outlaw, and he felt safer away from temptation.

"Now," said Sancho Pedro, when they were alone, "there is one thing I wish you to do at once. I am sure that one of those stage passengers had in his possession, twenty-four hours ago, certain papers that I wish to secure. Will you enter a prison room with the rest of them, keep your counsel, and endeavor to ascertain which one of them has, or had, the papers? I'll reward you well to do it."

CHAPTER IV.

JOHN JONES SHOWS HIS TEETH.

BENSON began to see wherein he might be made useful. Clearly the road-agent was very anxious to secure the papers in question, whatever they were, and he wished to have a spy in the prisoners' own camp, as we may say.

The contemptible nature of the work disgusted the new member, who believed in making war openly, if at all; but he concealed his feelings and agreed to the proposal.

As a result, Sancho Pedro conversed with him for a long time, directing him to listen to all the men said, to watch them sharply, and even to ask questions, if necessary, but to gain tidings of the missing papers, if such a thing were possible.

What these mysterious documents were the outlaw did not explain, and Benson asked no questions.

All arrangements having been completed, Sancho Pedro called in his men and the new convert was led away. For some time they traversed a dark passage, the light from the torch always falling on bare rocks, and then they arrived at a point where the rocky floor descended abruptly, almost perpendicularly.

"Hyer's whar we leave yer," said one of the men. "Jest set down on ther rock an' slide, an' you'll drop inter our Reflection Pit, as we call it. Don't be afeerd, but slide. Et is only a few feet down."

Benson, however, hesitated, as well he might. The idea of sliding down a spout of that kind into utter darkness was not agreeable, and he showed so much reluctance that a torch was tossed down ahead of him.

After that he sat down, as directed, and they let go of him; whereupon he slipped over a glass-like rock for a dozen feet like a flash and then landed safely on a level foundation.

He picked up the torch and looked around, expecting to see his companions, but, instead, saw only an empty room, or dungeon, about thirty feet square and half as high.

The fact that his stage companions were not there caused him to suspect some trick, but at that moment there was a stir at the top of the spout and then a man came sliding down the spout, vainly clutching at the sides.

He was shot into the middle of the dungeon like a log, but in a moment more was on his feet and stood revealed as Ezekiel Higgins.

"Gosh all hemlocks! be yeou hyar?" he cried, at once recognizing Benson. "Did yeou seo me take the degree in Masonry, Odd Fellowship or whatever they call it? I slipped like a greased pig an' come so fast it almost set my pants afire. Hallo! here's another!"

This time it was Buck Brazer. He was projected as Higgins had been, but at once arose and began to disturb the air with vehement profanity. Perceiving his predecessors, however, he grew calmer, and, with Higgins, enjoyed himself considerably in watching the others come down—Lyman, Strout and John Jones.

None of them were injured by the fall, and they were soon in consultation. Allenton did not appear, and Strout explained that he had knocked down one of the guards and made good his escape.

After Benson had been taken away, the entire party had been separated, probably to prevent suspicion falling on Sancho Pedro's new convert, and only Strout had seen Allenton's desperate dash for liberty.

"Wal, I reckon ther rest on us er hyar ter stay," observed Brazer, mournfully.

"Don't be tew sure on that," said Higgins, hopefully. "I'm goin' tew try tew climb up that sluiceway."

No one answered him, but some of the less sanguine, remembering how they had vainly grasped at the sides of the "spout" in coming down, felt that there was little hope.

Higgins, however, was a persevering man, and he at once surveyed the sole avenue of escape. The outlook was not promising. Nature or art had made the bottom and sides of the spout smooth almost to a glassy nature, and in no place was there a chance for hand or foothold along the steep ascent.

Still, the Yankee went at the task bravely, and with Lyman standing behind him to give his aid, managed to advance for a little distance. Then, however, his feet slipped and he shot back to the bottom.

"Gol-darn the tarnal spout!" he cried, wrathfully. "I b'lieve they hev rubbed soap all the way up an' daown it."

"You can't get up thar," said Brazer, harshly.

"Why can't I?" demanded Higgins, upon whom this opposition seemed to act like a spur.

"Why, darn your butes, it's too slippery," and Brazer turned away as though to end the talk.

Higgins, however, turned to John Jones, who had advanced to his side, and who, like himself, seemed interested in the queer passageway.

"See here," said the Yankee. "I come from where they git up inventions, I dew. I've got a patent on a lightnin'-rod, a churn, a pump-handle and a 'lectric light—the last applied fur. Naow, do yeou s'pose I'm goin' tew stay down in this hole like a rat in a trap an' dew nothin'?"

"What can we do?" Jones slowly asked.

"I thought I could climb, but I can't; it's tew darned slippery. But yeou wait an' I will hev an idee."

The next ten minutes were passed in roaming restlessly about the dungeon. The prisoners looked at it from every possible standpoint, but in each case it appeared to be a trap from which there was no escape.

Benson, remembering what he had been hired to do, watched for some signs of the mysterious papers, but he saw nothing of them. He did

not expect to do so. The search of the outlaws had been thorough, and it was not likely any such document could have escaped their notice.

"Mr. Sancho Pedro has some plot in his mind which I cannot fathom," thought Benson. "He has a use for me, but the time is not yet come. This watch here is a farce; I do not believe he thinks the missing article is among our crowd. He has a use for me, but I hardly see what it is yet. The fair Inez is in the plot, and her smiles were as deceitful as rotten ice. What is their game?"

The young man stared at the wall as though he hoped to read there the explanation of the riddle, but no light came from his cogitation.

He was interrupted by a stir from the other men, and Higgins exultantly announced that John Jones had conceived a plan for getting out of the dungeon.

It was a somewhat novel one, and consisted in making a living ladder which should reach from the bottom to the top of the "spout." The slippery way could not be climbed, but could not the prisoners, by resting their feet on each other's shoulders, "bridge the chasm," as Higgins expressed it.

All caught at the idea, but when they came to put it in operation, and Brazer was asked to stand at the bottom, as the heaviest man in the crowd, a new idea came to him.

"See yer, I b'lieve this plan has its drawbacks."

"How so?" Higgins asked.

"Why, darn yer butes, it ain't fa'r. Ther first man kin git out all right, but how in blazes is ther last one ter do ther trick? I'm ther foot o' ther ladder, an' it leaves me an' those jest about me, ter climb."

His argument was all well enough, so far as it went, but he was soon convinced. Even if but one man could get out, that much would be a gain, for it would give him a chance to aid the others; and, moreover, it was probable that a rope or some similar contrivance existed at the head of the spout by which men could be raised.

With this much explained to him, Brazer gave way gracefully and the living ladder was formed. The big miner stood at the bottom, bracing himself firmly, and Lyman mounted upon his shoulders, lying flat on the bottom of the spout.

Next came Higgins, then Strout, then Benson, and only the addition of John Jones was needed to make all serene.

The colored boy crept up over his companions carefully, for there was a good deal of pressure upon those at the bottom, and reached Benson.

"You'll fall a little short," said the latter, anxiously.

John made no answer. He crept along and planted a foot on each of Benson's shoulders, but even then, he was two feet from the top.

He hesitated for a moment, almost discouraged, for he knew how slippery the rocks were, but it was the only chance for liberty; so he hugged the surface closely and began his climb.

Every moment he expected to slip and go gliding backward, but luck favored him and he drew near the top. Then he reached out his hand and caught at a point of rock, his dark face glowing with triumph.

The emotion was short lived.

Suddenly, from around the corner, came the terrible form of a jaguar, and a savage snarl was enough to prove his hostility.

The apparition put John's courage to flight in an instant. He released his hold and shot backward upon Benson, and the mishap was enough to disarrange the whole human ladder.

Another moment and they went tumbling down the smooth rocks like a row of ten-pins.

That no one was injured was proved by the way in which they at once bounded to their feet, feeling about their waists for the weapons they would have had there, only for the fact that Sancho Pedro had appropriated them.

Had their situation been less serious, their mishaps would have been a laughable one; as it was, it caused consternation and alarm.

At the top of the incline, the jaguar stood looking down at them, snarling in a subdued fashion, but showing his sharp teeth suggestively.

"Merciful Heaven!" exclaimed Strout, "we shall all be killed. That beast will tear us in pieces!"

"Go slow," suggested Benson, with the calmness of one who judges by infallible signs. "That fellow has no intention of coming down. Don't you see he has stopped to stay! It is my opinion he is a regular sentinel at that point."

The theory impressed all as reasonable, and they began to feel more at ease, but Brazer summed up the situation in a single terse sentence:

"Ef he is a guard, he holds the fort; we can't pass his post."

No one disputed him, but another consultation was held in which all tried to grasp at a way out of the dilemma—all, excepting John Jones.

The colored youth stood at one side, silent but thoughtful. Benson noticed this, after awhile.

"Perhaps John has an idea. He gave us the other, you know. Now is it, pard?"

"Is jaguars afeerd o' fire?" Jones asked, slowly.

"I believe they are, though I never tackled one," answered Benson.

"Den, s'pose we do dis ober ag'in an' I take de torch an' fight de animile?"

"Hurrah! that air is ther figger!" shouted Higgins. "We kin cl'ar ther road, sure."

Lyman echoed his words, but the others hesitated. The plan might fail and expose Jones to the merciless claws and teeth of the jaguar, and they had no desire to have him sacrificed for them.

"Don't you be afeerd," said John. "I kin do it, sure."

CHAPTER V.

A CHOICE OF EVILS.

JOHN'S confidence settled the matter. The other prisoners were anxious to escape, and if he felt capable of putting the jaguar to flight, they would not object very seriously.

Accordingly, the torch which lighted the den was taken from the crevice, and then they prepared for a second attempt.

The ladder was formed as before, though Benson, who was thus brought within seven or eight feet of the jaguar, had little liking for his position. The animal kept his place and snarled fiercely as he saw what was being done, and every moment Benson expected him to leap down upon them.

Last of all, John Jones began ascending the novel ladder, his torch held above his head.

The crisis was at hand.

The jaguar greeted the advancing torch with snarls of increased fierceness. He was plainly ill at ease, though he could not yet understand the full danger.

John's face bore a look of dogged firmness. He was sufficiently moved to feel his heart thumping like a drumstick, but he had nerved himself for the venture.

He reached Benson's shoulders and, standing erect, waved the torch from side to side. The glare of light confused, angered and disturbed the jaguar. He felt there was need of "unceasing vigilance," but he had no ambition to meet a firebrand.

Jones prepared for the great effort. He crouched low for a moment, and then, with a bound which would have done credit to an acrobat, he sprang up the incline, touching his foot to the rock once and then gaining the top.

Before this rush the jaguar had retreated a step, but his aspect was aggressive and ferocious. An ominous cry passed his parted lips and in another second he would have leaped upon the negro.

That moment of indecision proved his ruin, John thrust the blazing torch into his very face, and with a terrible scream the brute turned and darted away through the dark passage beyond.

Trembling with excitement, the victor looked hurriedly about him. A coiled rope lay on the rock, one end fast to some object overhead. John flung the loose portion down and the way was open for the others to ascend.

They came up quickly, shook hands in some cases, and then settled down to business.

"We haven't a moment to lose," said Benson. "The cry of that jaguar may have been heard by the road-agents, or he may have sense enough to seek them as a sign that something is wrong. Let's get out of this on the jump."

"Whar shall we go?" Brazer asked.

"Anywhere. That will be as well as to stay here, even though we run straight into the main den."

There was truth in this, and they started at once. A narrow passage led them for twenty feet and then joined one running at right angles. Luckily, several of the party remembered that they had come from the right, so they turned to the left.

Lyman, Benson and Jones strode at the head, the latter carrying the torch. It seemed strange to see the boys in front and such a veteran as Brazer at the rear; but in emergencies, strong wills usually manifest themselves.

For a while, they went through a passage which was almost as regular as though made by hand, but all was of rock and no avenue of exit from the cave was visible. Then the passage widened and they saw a wide chamber littered with rocks piled about in every conceivable way.

No sound of pursuit had yet been heard, and they pushed forward. The gigantic boulder, which took every possible shape, often forming pillars for the support of the low, rocky roof, made their course necessarily zigzag, and Higgins suddenly became uneasy.

"See here," he said, "I'm darned afraid we are gittin' intew troubled water. Mebbe it's all right, but it seems tew me we ain't holdin' a deereet course. This darned hole is like a labyrinth, and there is a proper good chance o' gittin' turned 'round."

The warning was enough to bring all to a halt. They had seen no sign of any wall for some time; only the eccentric piles of rocks were visible. Had they indeed become confused?

"I am sure this is the right way," said Lyman.

"Then the cave is a darned big one," retorted Higgins. "At this rate, we ought tew be nigh about across the sierras. It's my opinion, we're trottin' 'round in a circle."

"Well, what can we do?"

"Lay rocks on the floor tew mark our course," Higgins suggested.

"I will tear my handkerchief in pieces, and drop a small bit every few paces," said Benson.

This plan was approved by all, though it might be the means of guiding the road-agents themselves; and Benson was about to begin when Brazer again came to the front.

"Down with ther light!" he ordered. "Ef ther gang ain't on our track, I'm a liar. I heerd vices."

The torch was lowered, and all listened. Then, plainly enough, came a sound which all knew to be a man giving some order.

"What shall we do?" asked Strout, his face growing paler than ever.

"Hide," said Brazer, tersely; and, with the word, he crept into a crevice between two rocks.

All followed his example except Benson and John Jones. The latter touched his white friend on the arm.

"S'posen we keep on, instead of hidin'," he said. "Dis torch hab split into two pieces, an' we can leab one an' take one."

"We ought to hang together, John," said Benson.

"See here, boss; one word wid you. I tells you dar is a traitor in dat gang. I don't know which he is, or I would speak out bold. Now, you hear what I tell you—dem fellers will be taken ag'in; we mustn't be."

"A traitor! Are you sure, John?"

"Sartin sure."

"By George! I more than half believe you. I have thought—"

Just then the voice which had before alarmed them arose again, this time nearer, and looking back, Benson saw a light flickering on the higher rocks.

The sight decided him.

"We will go," he said.

Jones tossed one half of the torch, which had split in two in his hand, to Higgins, and then they passed on.

The others supposed they would hide near, and made no remonstrance.

The negro boy went more rapidly than ever, his bright eyes scanning every rock closely. Benson followed, thinking of what he had lately said. Was there indeed a traitor among the ex-passengers of the coach?

He remembered how tamely they had surrendered, although fourteen revolvers might have been turned upon the foe. Was that surrender the result of cowardice or treachery?

"Who was for fight and who for surrender?" he suddenly asked.

"When?" asked the negro, who had himself been busily thinking.

"In the pass."

"Dunno; but I wish I did. Tell you what 'tis, de road-adjutants expected to make a big haul, an' dey got cheated. Dey had a pardner inside de stage, an' he worked de claim in their favor, but dey didn't get no great spec, I reckon."

John spoke with a sudden rush of confidence, and Benson was tempted to tell of his interview with Sancho Pedro; but, brief as his young life had been, he had learned the importance of keeping his own counsel, and he said nothing.

The fugitives had gone beyond sight and hear-

ing of the torch-bearers, and they began to have strong hopes of final escape, when all their plans went into chaos before a sudden and startling event.

Around one of the numerous rocky pillars came a man who had the indelible stamp of a road-agent upon feature and dress. His appearance was most untimely; but that he was thoroughly surprised, on his own part, was proved by the way in which he looked at them.

Young Benson at once showed his mettle. He had seen a bit of wild life before his coming to California, and had before that day fought to save his life. He knew too the value of prompt action.

With a panther-like movement he sprang upon the road-agent. His left hand closed around the fellow's throat, and with his right he snatched a revolver from his belt—movements executed with remarkable quickness.

Another moment and the weapon's muzzle was at its owner's head.

"Yield!" said Benson, in a sharp tone. "Utter one cry of alarm, and, by my life, I'll shoot you!"

"Hold up!" was the terrified response. "Who in blazes be you, an' what do you want? I don't know you."

"We know you, and that is enough. You are one of Sancho Pedro's men."

"Of course I am. Take me to the captain an' he will tell you so."

Benson's face lighted a little. The man did not comprehend the situation. Instead of recognizing them as enemies to the band, he believed them loyal and thought his own faith questioned.

"There is one way for you to prove it," said the quick-witted young man. "We are on our way to the outer world. If you can lead us there, I will believe you one of the band. Otherwise, off goes your head!"

CHAPTER VI.

INEZ.

THE captured road-agent, who was a late acquisition to Sancho Pedro's martial band, saw nothing unfair in this proposition. Really, the encounter had been a most fortunate one for Benson and Jones, and they began to see their way clear.

The outlaw was released, and then he started off through the rocky labyrinth at a rapid pace. At his heels followed his captors, and the revolver covered his head.

John was particularly delighted at the way in which his white pard had outwitted their guide, and being a young man of nerve himself, he decided that Benson would be a good man to travel with regularly.

At last the blaze of the outlaw's torch flickered backward, and as a slight puff of wind rounded the nearest column, it became evident that they were nearing the entrance of the cave.

A little further and they stood under no roof except that of the heavens.

Night had fallen since their career as captives began, and it was quite dark, though a few faintly-gleaming stars were visible. Still they had no means of knowing on what particular portion of the mountain they were.

"There! haven't I kept my word?" the robber asked.

"You've done nobly," Elgar answered. "Are you the man who joined us a little while ago?"

"Yes. A week ago Monday. My name is Moss."

"Oh! I remember that part," said Benson, as carelessly as though Moss had long been a household word with him. "Are you busy now?"

"Not particularly."

"Well, we are going down to where the stage was attacked. The captain lost something there. Will you come with us and get a chance to win Sancho Pedro's good-will?"

"Sartin," the man declared. "Did he lose anything valerable?"

"Yes. A diamond ring, worth a cool hundred. Of course he is worried about it, and afraid it will be ground under the hoof of some horse before morning, so he told me he would give twenty dollars to the man who found it."

Once more Benson's strategy was successful. He did not know the way to the stage-road, and wished the man to guide him there, while at the same time he wanted to keep him away from the other robbers.

The scheme was entirely successful, and as the start was made, the pards managed to get their new companion at the front. Benson had slipped the confiscated revolver into his own belt, but its owner either forgot all about it or

concluded to let it pass for the sake of getting on good terms with the others.

Both the young men had a good deal of reluctance in regard to abandoning the other prisoners, but each wisely decided that their best course was to go to Sierra Flat and spread the alarm.

The genuine road-agent led the way toward the road most faithfully, and all was going well when some one suddenly stepped into the path in front of him.

He paused and lifted his hat, recognizing Inez, the female outlaw, but on Edgar Benson the discovery fell with the aspect of a great calamity.

Knowing that she would recognize him, he snatched the revolver from his belt and sprang toward her, but with a hard little laugh, she thrust out her own glittering six-shooter, just a shade before him.

"Halt!" she cried, derisively, "I have you foul. Up with your hands, and keep them there—I hold the drop. Up, I say!"

Deep disappointment marked the face of the youth, but he knew Inez was not to be trifled with in any way. When she caressed his hand in the cave, she had seemed like a panther which, in a spasm of short-lived good nature, fawns upon the creature it is its nature to rend.

So Benson put up his hands, obediently, but far from being subdued, and a single look was enough to make John follow suit.

The male road-agent, too, believing himself addressed, fell into line, but looked astounded.

"Now, then," cried Inez, "what does all this mean?"

"What does what mean?" gasped the fellow.

"Why are you guiding these men away?"

"We're goin' ter find ther cap'n's diamond."

"What diamond?"

"Ther one he lost in the pass."

Inez, during the conversation, had kept her eyes on Benson. It was well for her she did so. All he desired was a shadow of a chance to escape her bullet and he would promptly act.

In the darkness, she could not read faces, but she stamped her foot angrily.

"Benson, what does this mean?" she demanded.

"Why, it's just as Moss says," he replied, resolved to try strategy on her, small as was the hope. "The captain lost a diamond in the pass and we are going to get it."

Inez laughed mockingly, and then, with a change of mood, stamped her foot again. The dove of the cave had turned to a vixen.

"Moss, where did you find these men?" she asked.

The fellow told all, while Benson watched in vain for a chance to use his claws. Inez watched him, and the little revolver which covered his face did not once waver.

He saw all the corner-stones of his prospective liberty demolished, but he was game to the last.

A portion of the truth dawned upon the girl, but the part that was lacking would keep; she did not try for that.

"So, Benson," she said, "you have been playing with us. We trusted you, and you use your first chance to attempt escape."

"Can you blame me?" Edgar asked.

"I do; I hate treachery."

"That is why I decided not to play the spy on those who trusted me," he retorted.

"Come, you are too sharp; you are impudent," said Inez.

The last words, despite their force of construction, were absently said. Then she fell into thought, during which all watched her.

"Benson," she said, arousing at last, "I want to speak with you privately. Will you sacredly promise not to attack me while we are by ourselves?"

"I promise," he replied.

She turned, as though confident he would keep his word, and he followed promptly, at the same time hiding his revolver in the bosom of his shirt.

Several feet away Inez paused, and then, as he came up, she laid her hand upon his arm.

"Edgar," she said, unsteadily, "you have pained me greatly."

"How so?"

"I trusted and—yes, I trusted you. We talked in the cave, and I thought we had become good friends. You said you was a stranger in this country, and I resolved to help you. Sancho Pedro, too, liked your looks. He saw that you were bold, intelligent and quick-witted—just such a man as he likes to have in the 'Nest.' We offered you a chance in our band, with all possible pleasures. And this is the way you reward us."

She spoke earnestly, but not angrily. Very painful were her voice and manner, and Ed-

gar, who was only human, began to think he had not done just right.

"We all like liberty," he muttered.

"Where can you find more than in Sancho Pedro's cave? It is the home of the freest men in California. Liberty, wealth and all possible pleasure are ours; we are a collection of sovereigns. We asked you to join us. Sancho Pedro had honors for you, and I—I liked you, too, Edgar!"

The fair outlaw laid her hand upon his shoulder, and her face was dangerously near his own. He felt like one intoxicated on some rare element of the air—a blissful intoxication, since it brought such shapes to his view.

One moment he wavered, and then his strong common-sense came to his aid. This girl, beautiful though she might be, was an outlaw, a companion of assassins, and her tender ways were but assumed to make him a pliant tool to do the work of her brother and herself.

"I am very much obliged for your good opinion," he said, "and I suppose I am foolish to kick over the traces; but I don't believe I would like the life of a cut-throat and thief."

Inez started back in amazement. She had expected some resistance, but she did not imagine he would speak so bluntly. She was surprised, disappointed and angry.

"You are very complimentary!" she cried.

"I tried to get as near truth as possible," he said modestly.

"Edgar Benson, you are a fool!"

"Indeed! Well, really, this is interesting. We are getting into statistics now. Go on!"

She looked at him steadily for a moment, and then suddenly raised her revolver so as to cover his head.

"Enough of empty words," she said, in a way which smacked of menace. "You and I will be everything or nothing. Take your choice now—swear allegiance to Sancho Pedro or die!"

Young Benson calmly folded his arms across his breast; but the movement brought his hand near the lately-concealed revolver, and he was far from being subdued.

"Ain't you a little severe—" he began; but she interrupted him by a stamp of her foot.

"No words," she said hotly. "Make your choice!"

CHAPTER VII.

SIERRA FLAT.

"Not yet!"

The words fell upon the girl's ear in a new voice, and at the same time a hand closed upon her wrist, turning her revolver upward in the air. She bounded fiercely, but a strong arm crept around her waist; she was in the grasp of one in whose hands she was like a child.

Young Benson laughed.

"Well done, John," he said cheerfully. "We have won another move in the game. Miss Inez, allow me to take your revolver."

One glance over her shoulder had shown Inez that it was the colored youth who had seized her, but she was far from being subdued.

As Benson took her revolver, her lips parted in a shrill scream—a cry for help—but it was checked at an early stage as Edgar clapped his hand over her mouth.

"Beware!" he earnestly said. "Do not force us to use violence to a girl. We must and will escape from here, and, if need be, we will tie you hand and foot. We prefer milder means, though. If you promise to remain silent, nod your head, and I will remove my hand."

Promptly enough came the sign, and he kept his word. John, however, still retained his hold.

"Well?" questioned the girl, with surprising coolness.

"What do you wish to know?"

"My fate."

"It lies with the future. So far as I am concerned, my actions will not govern it. You are your own judge and jury, as I may say. We are going to escape, though, and I now request you to guide me to the pass."

"And I refuse."

"We are sure to find it, anyway."

"Very well; find it. I shall not help you."

She had assumed another of the moods peculiar to women of her nature. With her little foot beating the ground, she pouted like an angry child.

Edgar was at fault.

What was to be done with the girl if they did not take her with them? If left to herself, she would soon bring the outlaws down upon them. John Jones seemed to read his thoughts.

"I tied up dat skunk ober dar wid some strings I had in my pockets. S'pose we change 'em to dis female road-adjutant, an' make *him* guide us to de pass?"

Edgar caught at the idea, and in a short time Inez was bound as planned.

The work was thoroughly done, but they used all possible gentleness and left her seated on a rock, like a captive queen. She had stormed at first, and then relapsed into a deceitful calm; but when the gag was added, she was necessarily quiet.

Young Benson had, however, made an enemy who might cause him bitter trouble in the future.

Next, they turned their attention to Moss and ordered him to lead the way to the pass. He demurred, of course, but the muzzle of a revolver is a convincing argument in the majority of cases, and did not fail on this particular occasion.

In ten minutes they stood in the pass.

"Now, my little man," said Benson, who had naturally grown exuberant, "you may return and free Queen Inez."

"I'm everlastin'ly obliged ter you," said the fellow, "but I reckon I won't."

"You won't?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"My life ain't insured! Why, that tiger-cat would kill me deader'n a mummy. I know her an' I know Sancho Pedro. No sirree, no more o' ther 'Nest' fur me. I'll now set my face east an' slope."

"Desert?"

"That's ther English on't."

"But, see here, what about Inez? We left her bound, and—"

"So you can't blame me fur leavin' her bound."

Bad as Benson believed the girl-outlaw to be, he wished her no harm, and presented her danger in a feeling manner; but Moss declared that she was exactly in the beaten path of the robbers and would not long remain undiscovered.

"Mebbe they've found her already, an' my advice to you is ter slope. That's my present plan. I don't bar you no ill-will fur what you've did, fur I can't say I loved ther life; but you've made this part o' Californy so hot fur me that my ha'r will stand on end until I cross ther divide. So long!"

At the last word, Moss wheeled and strode away toward the East.

"I reckon his advice is good," said Edgar.

"We will do likewise."

And away they went on the road to Sierra Flat.

For a mile they wasted few words and made time which would have done credit to a professional runner, and then they eased up somewhat and discussed the situation.

It was their intention to spread the news of the danger of the other captives, as soon as possible, and they hoped a party would be organized to go at once to the rescue.

John Jones also told how he had so opportunely appeared when Inez held the revolver at Edgar's head.

When his white partner was taken aside by the girl, John felt sure no good would come of it, and he was not long in making an attack on Moss. Despite the difference in their years, he soon found that he was the outlaw's superior, and he was able to bind him, and then appeared, as described, to baffle the charming Inez.

Thus they went on, without meeting any mishap, until Sierra Flat was reached. It was not a pretentious village, nor yet an insignificant one, but a bustling mining town which had grown up where a little level space had been left by Nature amid the peaks which arose on every side.

It was nearly midnight when our young friends arrived, but several saloons were still open, and toward one of these they made their way. Neither of them was acquainted with the village, but over the door of the festive establishment was a sign proclaiming it a hotel, so in they went.

They saw the usual saloon sights—men in all stages of inebriation, drinking, smoking, playing cards, and telling stories.

At first their advent created no attention but Benson went to the man behind the bar, and briefly told who they were and where they had come from, and then the bar-tender gave the news in a loud voice.

As a result, the two pairs soon became the center of attention, and they learned that Allenton, the stage passenger who had first escaped, had returned to the village and told of the situation of the others.

"What has been done in the way of rescue?" Edgar asked.

"Nothin'," some one answered.

"Nothing?"

"That's what I said."

"But, surely, you intend to do something?"

"Not that we knows on. What: be we citizens o' Sierra Flat goin' ter run our necks inter trouble for ther sake o' a pack o' tenderfoots?"

"I wasn't but one tenderfoot in the crowd."

"Wal, they're interlopers, anyhow. D'ye s'pose we will help ther men that come ter ther Flat ter take ther bread out o' our mouths? I reckon not!"

And this the parads found to be the sentiment of the crowd. They hated and feared Sancho Pedro, but they had little more love for newcomers.

Edgar was perplexed, and it was with a good deal of embarrassment that he asked the landlord if he would take him in and wait for his pay until he could make a raise.

He expected a refusal, but old Abe Durgin was not a mean man, and as a result the boy parads were soon domiciled in a private room.

They had agreed to hang together for a while, at least.

Some time was spent in planning for the rescue of Brazer, Lyman and the others, but no good came of it and they finally went to bed and to sleep.

It was still dark when Benson awoke, and, turning over, he was about to settle down to sleep again when he became aware that John Jones was not in his place.

He called his name, but there was no response; he arose and lighted a lamp and found that he was not in the room.

Considerably perplexed, he was considering what to do when the window was shoved up and John entered. He nodded and smiled at sight of Benson.

"Where the dickens have you been?" the latter demanded.

"Out to get a breff of fresh air," was the reply.

"Good Lord! didn't you get enough of that before we came in?"

"Wal, you see I's been to borrow some money ter pay our bills. We needed it, an' hyer de article am."

And the negro displayed several ten-dollar gold pieces.

"Where did you get those?" asked Edgar, his face changing.

John smiled.

"You t'ink dat I stole um, but I didn't. You see, I played de roots on Sancho Pedro an' his road-adjutants. When we started in de stage I s'pected dar might be trouble, so I hid dese yaller boys in de corner ob de vehicle. Mighty lucky I did, don't you t'ink so?"

The negro looked innocent and sincere, but his companion still had his doubts. The story sounded like a fable, and though he preferred to think well of Jones, he went back to bed in a state of great uncertainty.

CHAPTER VIII.

GYPSY.

On the afternoon of the following day, and at a point a mile north of Sierra Flat, a picture was presented by the mingled effect of nature and art which would have attracted an artist.

Ordinarily, there was nothing in the grim gulch, with its bleak rock and absence of all kinds of verdure, to interest a lover of the beautiful, but on this occasion there was an unusual feature about the scene.

On a small bowlder a young girl was standing and watching the top of the cliff. In years, she could not have been more than sixteen, but she had the physical development of a woman united with the freshness of a mere girl.

Very pretty she was, though plainly clad, for her face was fully formed and full of color, her eyes bright, black and searching, and her hair clustered about her head in ringlets that were as dark as night.

In her hands was a small rifle, and from her manner it seemed as though she expected some animal or bird to reappear at the cliff's top, but it came not and she stepped down from the bowlder.

"Too bad!" she said, aloud. "Had the big-horn shown his head I would have had a supper worthy of a king, and now I must take what I can get."

She had abandoned her hopes, but she stood still for several minutes, occasionally glancing upward, until a new sound caused her to wheel suddenly.

What she saw was calculated to arouse instant and great alarm.

Scarcely three feet from her stood one of that species of beasts of prey before which even the hardy hunter and trapper of the West stands back in fear.

It was a great, smooth-coated jaguar, handsome in his way as any beast can be, but with a suggestion of terrible claws and teeth that made his appearance anything but a pleasure.

The girl was undeniably frightened. She betrayed the fact in her vanishing color, in her quivering mouth and startled eyes, but she had presence of mind sufficient not to attempt flight.

Just then, the jaguar did not seem in a hostile mood. He neither growled nor showed his teeth, but looked at the girl steadily and peacefully.

She saw all this, and, wild as the idea might be, resolved to try to make friends with him. She had heard of such things, and it might possibly occur again, improbable as it was.

"Tiger, old fellow! Good boy! good boy!"

She did not know exactly how to "talk jaguar," but she must say something, and she made her voice as smooth as possible. It quivered a little at first, but grew stronger at the end as the animal showed unmistakable signs of pleasure.

His lips parted, but, instead of snarling, he purred like a cat and advanced toward her. Then upon her flashed the conviction that he was not an untamed rover of the mountain but the pet of some one who had a taste for strange company.

Acting on this idea, she put out her hand, and the jaguar advanced and rubbed his head against it, at the same time increasing the volume of his amiable purr.

He had been like a dog who awaits a sign of friendly recognition.

The girl's fears fled. She caressed the glossy coat of the animal, and he gave every sign of pleasure. He was a powerful fellow, larger than the average of his species, but nothing could exceed his good humor at that moment.

She talked to him as though he had been a human being, anxious to strengthen her hold upon him. She called him pet names and stroked his head, and he, in turn, gave every proof of brute friendship.

Thus half an hour passed away. Then she grew weary of her company, and wished she was back at her cabin in the village. She was anxious to go; but what of the jaguar? An attempt to depart might arouse his hostility, or he might insist on following her to the village, while she had no desire to adopt him permanently.

Finally she moved away, and he followed, keeping close by her side and appearing as amiable as ever.

In this way a hundred yards were traversed, and then a shout arose in a man's voice. The girl looked up quickly, but the unknown was concealed by a series of rocks.

A deep note from the jaguar's lips drew her attention to him. He, too, had heard the shout, and his gaze was intently fixed on the point from which it had proceeded. His parted lips revealed his teeth, and his look was ominous.

The voice of the man had changed his mood, and he seemed ready for any act of hostility.

For a moment he seemed irresolute, and then, partially wheeling, he made a single leap, and gained the top of the ledge. Another bound and he was gone from sight.

The girl was still surprised at his abrupt departure when, from around a point of rocks, came three men.

Her color retreated a little at the sight; they were not desirable neighbors.

Two of them were big, brawny fellows, coarse of feature and dress; but he who strode at their front was gaudily clad, and his smooth face looked boyish and handsome.

"Sancho Pedro!" muttered the girl.

The discovery was simultaneous, and with a new light on his face the road-agent came toward her. She wished to flee, but well aware that he could overtake her if he tried, stood her ground with the outward calmness of one naturally brave.

He advanced and lifted his hat.

"My dear Miss Gypsy, I am pleased to see you," he said, blandly. "It's a long while since I have had the pleasure of looking on your face."

"I hope you have borne it philosophically," she said, curtly.

"On the contrary, I have longed and mourned for my old playmate of the San Joaquin valley."

"I can not say I have shed any tears. In-

deed, I thought, until lately, that you had probably graced a rope of hemp before now."

"You have a high opinion of me," he said with evident pique.

"I have not forgotten how you left the San Joaquin valley."

"That was a bad business," he said, shaking his head, "but 'twas the one dark spot on my life. Since then, I have lived in a blameless way."

Gypsy laughed shortly.

"You have plenty of cheek," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that I know you as you now are. I am not ignorant of the identity of Sancho Pedro, the road-agent."

The man looked confused and angry for a while. He had thought that no one near Sierra Flat could connect him, the present chief of robbers, with the fifteen-year-old boy who had fled from the San Joaquin valley with his hands red with blood. Such being the fact, however, he was sorry that he had approached the girl.

"Well, do you blame me?" he asked, catching at a straw.

"Perhaps no one is to blame for living by plunder and murder, but the honest miners of Sierra Flat entertain such an opinion on the subject that it would not be safe for you to show your head there."

"What do I care for their opinion," he muttered sullenly. "I am my own master; I make my own laws. More than that, two-score brave men follow where I lead and our money-box is well filled. That! for the miners of Sierra Flat."

He snapped his fingers contemptuously.

Gypsy did not answer.

"Do you wholly condemn me?" he asked, after a pause.

"How can I do otherwise? Your hands are red with blood, and you are still in the midst of your wickedness. There is pardon for those who repent; there can be none for the persistent sinner."

Her solemn words and manner only brought a sneer to his face.

"You make rather a pretty preacher, but you are only a child, a girl of sixteen years. What do you know of such matters? But, come, Gypsy, let us be friends. We were all of that once; let us renew the olden tie."

"Thank you; but I must decline. I never liked you in the San Joaquin valley, for I read your heart as few girls of twelve years could. You proved my opinion correct when you murdered your uncle and fled. That act cut the frail bond between us. Now, I do not care to renew our acquaintance."

She spoke plainly, but without defiance. She knew Sancho Pedro well enough to dread a quarrel. He hesitated before answering, and was plainly engaged in subduing the anger she had aroused.

"Do not speak hastily, Gypsy. What if I should tell you that it is in my power to aid you greatly?"

"I should decline your aid."

"Wait, Gypsy, wait. You probably think I have some scheme for enriching you by the money I have taken on the road. This is not my plan, but, my dear girl, it is a fact that I can pour money at your feet in a shower. Wait, hear me through. Is honest wealth to be despised? Gypsy, I tell you I can make you the heiress of a hundred thousand dollars."

"Again I thank you—and decline!"

"Fool!" he exclaimed, harshly.

"Money is not to be despised, but there is deceit, or worse, in whatever you would do."

"I swear there is not. The fortune to which I refer is really your own, and you have but to prove your identity and claim it."

CHAPTER IX.

A CHAMPION FOR GYPSY.

GYPSY looked at him earnestly. He seemed to be sincere and she almost believed for a moment. She knew of no one in the world who could have left a fortune to her, but such a thing was possible.

"Where is your proof?" she asked.

Sancho Pedro laughed shortly.

"My dear girl, I am not exactly a Santa Claus, to go about pouring the good thing of life into people's hands unrewarded. I make it a point to look out for number one, at all times. I will make you the possessor of this immense fortune, but you must do me a favor in return."

"And that?"

"Is to marry me."

"Never!" exclaimed Gypsy.

The young outlaw's face clouded with anger,

but he made an effort and kept the emotion under control.

"Think again, Gypsy."

"Beh! I have thought enough, already. The mere idea is horrible."

She spoke impulsively, and regretted her plainness the moment the words were uttered. Darker still grew Sancho Pedro's face and his hand closed over her arm with a cruel grip.

"Beware, Gypsy; do not arouse the devil in my nature. You say you know me well, and, if so, you know I am not to be trifled with. For the last time, will you become my wife and, at the same time, the owner of this immense fortune?"

"Jose," she answered, calling him by his boyhood's name, "you require an impossibility. When I marry, if I ever do, it will be with a man who holds my—my love. I shall not stop to inquire whether he has money or not, but a million in gold would not influence me."

He could not doubt her sincerity, and a stubborn look settled upon his face.

"Then, by my life, you shall go to my cave and remain there until you will consent! My wife you shall be, even though it is a forced marriage. If it comes to that, I can find a minister who cares more for money than you seem to do."

"Jose!" she murmured faintly, terrified by his manner.

He laughed mockingly and began dragging her away, while his two fellow ruffians looked on with coarse smiles.

Suddenly, however, Gypsy remembered that she was armed, and her hand had already sought the pocket where nestled her revolver when the scene abruptly changed.

A clear, sharp voice rung out on the air, and the import of the words was not to be mistaken:

"Sancho Pedro! Stand where you are, all of you, and put your hands above your heads!"

The three road-agents wheeled like a flash. They were veterans in wild life, and had often heard and themselves uttered the well-known command, and they did not need a dictionary to hunt up its meaning.

One of them, however, considered himself a very cunning and invincible fighter, and as he turned, he flung up his revolver ready for a snap shot.

A report followed, but it was not caused by the road-agent. Indeed, his revolver went rattling to the ground and his right arm hung helplessly at his side, broken by a well-aimed shot.

"Is that lesson thrown away, or will you fellows obey me! Hands up, I say!"

Four revolvers were covering Sancho Pedro and his men, and they suddenly obeyed the command. They plainly saw that an effort to raise their own weapons would cost them dearly.

And who had thus appeared to block their path?

Simply Edgar Benson and his black pard, John Jones.

They had suddenly appeared from among the rocks, and with the coolness and precision of far older men, had taken the game in hand and secured "the drop."

Plainly, though strangers to the Sierra Flat region, they were not new to life of adventure.

"That's the correct caper," said young Benson, approvingly. "Now, just keep them there until I give you leave to drop."

"Curse you!" roared Sancho Pedro. "What do you mean by such work, you young hound?"

"Easy and slow, my good sir. I plead guilty to being young—I lack the maturity of your own nineteen years; but that scarcely weighs against me in this case, for I hold the drop! As for my motive, I don't propose to see this young lady dragged away by you and your crowd."

Gypsy, while he was speaking, went to his side, and then calmly turned her own revolver upon the boy road-agent.

The latter was mad with rage. He had tried to wheedle Benson into his service at the cave, but the young man had outwitted him and escaped his clutches, which, of course, made them deadly enemies; and now, to have him reappear and wrest Gypsy from his power was maddening.

He stormed and threatened for a while, but it suddenly occurred to him that, if he could avoid being marched into the village as a prisoner he would be very lucky.

As a result, he gradually abandoned his rage and indignation, acknowledged himself whipped and prepared to draw out of the game.

The pards now committed their sole mistake. With the outlaw in their grasp, they should have held fast to him; but, instead, he was allowed to go before they realized that there was more than a personal motive for detaining him.

"I reckon it am de policy ob dis outfit to beat a double-quick retreat," said John Jones, as the baffled trio went away. "When dem fellers git out ob sight, dey'll double on deir track, an' try to shoot us."

"That's sound sense," said Edgar. "Do you live at Sierra Flat, miss?"

"Yes, sir," answered Gypsy; "and I think I will return there at once."

"Another sensible idea. Well, if you'll allow us to escort you, we will try to take you through all right."

Gypsy expressed her pleasure at the plan, and thus they returned successfully to the village.

Their prompt retreat baffled any scheme Sancho Pedro might have for turning the tables, and by the time they had reached the little place mutual explanations had been made.

The full name of the girl was Gypsy Morrison, and she was a relative of Allenton, their companion of the late stage adventure. She had once lived in the San Joaquin valley, but, her parents dying, she had for two years been the ward of Allenton.

All this served to make her seem like an old acquaintance to Benson, and he was so pleased with the girl herself that he mentally decided to often avail himself of her invitation to call at the house.

He had not particularly liked Allenton; but he believed the perils they had met together would serve as a sort of bond.

Leaving her near her own door, the boy pards went toward their own quarters at the hotel.

"What do you think of her?" Edgar absently asked.

"Mighty fine gal," said the negro, unhesitatingly.

"We have made at least one pleasant acquaintance, in Sierra Flat," said the other, thoughtfully, "and I intend to follow it up."

"Do you s'pose she is really Gypsy Morrison?"

"Why, of course. What cause did she have for claiming a false identity?"

"None, dat I knows on."

"Did you ever hear of her before?"

"Prob'ly not, dough de name sounded familiar," said John, quickly.

"A queer name it is, too. She's a confounded pretty girl, and I mean to keep up her acquaintance. We will settle down to mining and fall into Sierra Flat ways as soon as possible."

The negro did not answer, but seemed in deep thought as they moved along.

On entering the hotel, they found their old friend, Mr. Higgins, pouring a flood of eloquence into the ears of the landlord; for, that morning, Higgins, Brazer, Lyman and Strout had reached the village in safety.

They, too, had succeeded in escaping from the road-agents' cave; so there was no occasion for the men of Sierra Flat to go to the rescue of the pilgrims who had suffered by the stage adventure.

CHAPTER X.

EDGAR BENSON'S PERIL.

IMMEDIATELY after supper, John Jones disappeared, and Edgar, after looking around for him for some time, concluded to go out alone on the stroll he had decided to take.

He went, and wandered through the principal streets of the little town—for, though yet an infant, every cabin was built on a line and miniature Broadways were abundant—observing everything as people of his nature will.

While thus engaged night fell upon the mountain, and Edgar was about to turn toward the hotel when two men approached him.

"Hallo, young feller!" said one, bluffly. "Is your name Benson?"

The youth looked at them sharply but he knew he had made more enemies than friends since crossing the divide.

"Yes," he said, quietly.

"Wal, we work for old man Allenton, an' he would like ter see you at his house. He says you gin a lift ter his gal, ter-day, when she was in trouble, an' he wants ter pay you turn for turn."

The plausible explanation smothered Benson's suspicions. He thought it natural that Allenton should send for him, while on his own part, he would be delighted to visit Gypsy again.

"All right; I'll call at once," he answered.

And then the men fell into place, one on each side of him, and in a way so natural that he suspected nothing.

One of them began to talk in a jovial way, but only a few steps had been taken when something cold touched Edgar's left temple, and the other fellow spoke in a sharp voice.

"Surrender or die, youngster! I've got my six-shooter at your head, an' one tech ov ther trigger means sure death. Hal—keep your hands away from your weepens! Hold hard, or I shoot!"

The argument was convincing, and knowing his life was at stake, Edgar stood still. He had been outwitted, and he must abide by the consequences.

He might, however, be able to show his teeth and...

"Well, what's the racket?" he asked.

"You're our prisoner."

"So you said before; but who are you and what do you want of me?"

"You'll l'arn all that bime-bye. Fur now, turn yer face west an' trot along."

"Have you been hired to kidnap me?"

"That's our business."

"I'll raise the pay-roll if you'll let me go free."

"Et's no use, young feller. You've got ter go ter ther mountains or lay down here an' pass in yer checks. Them is our orders. Take yer choice."

"I'll go," said Benson, promptly, but coolly.

They took away his only visible weapon, a revolver, and the march to the higher hills was begun. A man walked on each side of the prisoner, and he was not foolish enough to pit his strength against them.

He asked more questions, but they stubbornly refused to answer, and then he tried to solve the riddle himself. Who was at the bottom of his trouble?

Naturally, the answer to this question was—Sancho Pedro. This merciless young fellow he had twice defeated and thwarted of coveted prey. It was natural that he should strike back.

For some time they wound about among the passes, and then he was led into a dark opening in the rocks, which was plainly the entrance to a cave. He suspected it to be a rear way to gain Sancho Pedro's lair.

After stumbling along in the dark for several yards a light became visible in front and they soon entered a small chamber, wherein were two men.

Torches lighted the den, but not an article of furniture was visible. The two men before mentioned sat on boulders and were closely masked.

They looked up as the new comers entered, and one of the two arose.

Benson saw two keen eyes gleaming through holes in the mask, but not yet did he recognize the unknown.

"Is this Edgar Benson?" he asked, in a deep voice, which was plainly disguised.

"That's my name," was the prompt reply.

"Very good; I want to see you on important business."

"Can't you postpone it for a week or so?"

"There is no time like the present. You came to Sierra Flat, as the bearer of certain documents intended for one Gypsy Morrison, I believe."

"You believe wrong, then," retorted Edgar, convinced that the man was indeed Sancho Pedro.

"Do you deny it? Well, I am surprised. Permit me to say my information is complete. I know more than you think. These papers are of importance, because they relate to a fortune rightfully belonging to Miss Morrison, but there are those who wish to deprive her of her rights. Sancho Pedro, the boy road-agent, so called, is one of these men. He captured the whole gang of stage passengers; but, not knowing which one of the seven was the dispatch-bearer, made a betch of the whole affair, and you baffled him."

"Hold on, just one minute," interrupted Benson. "I hate to interrupt a man when he is wading waist-deep in statistics, but you're clean off, as far as I am concerned."

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't come to Sierra Flat for any such purpose, and I know nothing about the matter. I merely came to the village to dig gold and see the sights."

"Pardon me, but you are not speaking truthfully. My sources of information are reliable. You came to hand those papers over to Gypsy Morrison. Have you yet done so?"

Young Benson was really perplexed. He knew nothing whatever about the papers except what had been developed since the stage adventure, and he knew not what to think of this masked man.

Was he, or was he not, Sancho Pedro?

If so, both voice and form were disguised, but Edgar more than half-believed it was he.

He answered the last question after a brief pause.

"No, I haven't," he said.

"Then you admit possessing them?" cried the unknown, quickly.

"Not that I am aware of."

"Your manner indicates it."

"Then, my manner is an infernal liar. I don't know you, nor do I know what you are driving at, but, friend or foe, saint or sinner, I want you to understand you are working the wrong claim. I did not come to Sierra Flat with any papers in charge, and I know nothing about them."

"See here!" cried the masked man, "I am tired of this farce. Why do you lie to me?"

"I have told the truth."

"And you persist in your statement?"

"I do."

"Then I will find a way to make you speak. Miguel, come here!"

His fellow masquerader advanced.

"Place your revolver at this man's heart with everything ready for firing. I will count twenty-five, and at the last word you will press the trigger. Do you understand?"

"Si, senor," the man answered.

"Then take your place and let the music begin."

There was a firmness about these words which told Edgar Benson they were not intended as a jest. His life indeed hung trembling between earth and the future world.

At the same time he could have revealed nothing if he had twenty lives to lose.

From what had already occurred, he understood pretty well what was causing all this commotion. Some one had died and left a fortune of which Gypsy Morrison was the heiress. Valuable papers had been sent to Sierra Flat by a messenger, but who that person was, or what had become of the papers, nobody seemed to know.

The plot evidently was to cheat the girl out of her heritage, and when men scheme for a hundred thousand dollars, lives frequently fall below par in their estimation.

Yet, Edgar had no desire to be a victim in the case, and he did not hesitate to make an earnest appeal to the masked man. He declared his innocence of any and all connection with the affair, his manner being most solemn, but the masked man was not convinced or moved.

Miguel placed his revolver at the young prisoner's head and his superior began to count. The numerals were slowly and distinctly uttered, and four pair of eyes were fixed on Edgar's face.

Vain watching! if they hoped to see him quail. He faced them boldly, his head well thrown back, for he was resolved to die like a man, if die he must.

Internally, he was less calm. He had a bold, manly nature, which his recent wild life had heightened, but where is the man who can face death without an inward struggle? Life is sweet to all, and especially to the young, who have not lived long enough to taste its many cups of bitter disappointment.

So, Edgar Benson, in spite of his outward composure felt a horror never before known.

The given limit approached. The masked man neared the end of his counting; he pronounced the fatal word:

"Twenty-five!"

Click!

The hammer of the revolver fell, but no report followed. Either it had been unloaded, or had missed fire; and Benson, who had closed his lips tightly, opened them to gasp for air, confused and surprised that he was still in the land of flesh and blood.

CHAPTER XL

A TERRIBLE FATE.

A CURSE fell from the lips of the masked man.

"Are you made of iron?" he asked.

Edgar Benson had been weak about the knees, but his strength came back slowly.

"How can I tell what I do not know?" he asked.

"That is not it. Did you think I was fooling in regard to that revolver business?"

"I thought you in earnest."

"And you would die rather than to speak?"

"I had no choice. I tell you I know nothing about this matter!"

The masked man turned away in disgust. The revolver had not been loaded, and he did not want his prisoner to die with his secret untold, but he had believed that the trick would accomplish his purpose.

Failing, he spent five minutes in thought and then came back to his prisoner.

"I'm going to give you a few hours to reflect," he said. "You will be left alone in this room, but, just outside, will be one of my men who will put a bullet through you if you try to escape. I hope you will decide to save your life and tell the truth; for if you are stubborn when I come again, I will send you to a fate which will horrify you. I swear it!"

He went out, followed by his men, and Edgar was alone. He did not feel thankful for the reprieve. If he had got to die, as seemed certain, the sooner it was over the better.

"They had better kill me now," he muttered, darkly, as he sat on the boulder. "If I live, I'll do my level best to get square with them. They named me 'Fighting Ed,' down in Colorado, when I whipped the two cowboys, and I'll show these fellows that, boy though I am, they can't wipe me under their feet with impunity!"

After awhile, he began to think about the mystery of the missing papers. What were they, where were they, and who had brought them to the mountain country? What had become of them when the stage was attacked?

All these questions he considered without arriving at a satisfactory conclusion.

Again, he wondered who would benefit by the disappearance of the papers.

"I'm not posted in regard to the Morrison family," he thought, "but it strikes me that Mr. Allenton is the next heir. Yes, and now I remember that Higgins said there would have been a fight when the stage was attacked, only for Allenton. He counseled surrender. Yes, and, by Jupiter, I now believe his escape from the cave was all a put up job. He got away before the rest of us, and I thought it queer, then."

With suspicion once started in this channel, Edgar was not long in working out a chain of evidence. Allenton had heard of the death of the rich man, and of the papers, and he had hired Sancho Pedro to waylay the stage and secure the documents.

Both the villains had been ignorant of the identity of the person bearing the papers, which explained all subsequent movements, but it seemed that at least one person had decided that Edgar was the required party.

At the end of a time which seemed more than four hours, the masked man returned.

"Well," he said, "have you decided?"

"I reckon you will have to drive on your horse; I can't tell what I don't know."

"Fool!"

"Anything more?"

"Benson, you madden me. Your obstinacy is terrible. I am tempted to shoot you in your tracks; but you are a mere boy, and I will give you a chance for your life. Bring him along, men!"

The leader turned away and his subordinates followed with Edgar between them. His feet were free, but his hands bound as from the beginning.

They left the cave, and, standing once more under the sky, walked for half a mile. When the masked man paused, the prisoner had an inkling of what awaited him.

Just above them stood a spreading tree, a rare article in that land of rocks. Edgar saw this landmark and drew his own conclusions.

"Now," said the masked man, "I am going to put you in a state of torture you will scarcely like. I regret that I am obliged to do it, but it is your own fault. Mount that stone!"

He pointed to a rock about three feet high, and nearly square, which was directly beneath the tree.

With outward calmness Edgar obeyed, but when one of the men stepped to his side and noosed a rope about his neck, he had to shut his teeth tightly.

The loose end of the rope was thrown over a stout limb, and then the young prisoner expected to be suspended in space. Instead, however, the rope was tightened until he stood on his toes, and then tied firmly about the trunk of the tree.

"Perhaps you see my game," remarked the masked man. "I am going to leave you thus. The condition of the rope will compel you to stand on tip-toe, for if you settle down you will strangle. At first this will be a pleasant exercise, but, anon, I think you will find it a little tedious. This is to break your will, and I shall leave a man near here, so that, the first time you cry, 'I'll confess!' he will hasten to me, and you will be released from your fix. That is all. Good-night!"

And the party went away and left Edgar alone.

Their departure was scarcely a relief, for he was left in a most precarious situation—a very little exertion would hang him up to dry.

In one respect he had fooled the masked man. He had pretended to be shorter than he really was, by settling his body down together, and now that he was alone he was able to stand squarely on his feet without choking.

His hempen cravat was uncomfortable, but not yet painful.

For an hour he stood and listened, taking matters as coolly as possible. He was confident that shouting would do him no good, so he bore his troubles in silence.

He had, however, ceased to find his position comfortable. He was obliged to stand so erect that he was in an unnatural position, and little pains were shooting through his limbs, body, and neck.

And so the night wore away, not a word passing his lips, but thoughts in his mind which boded no good to the authors of his torture.

"Let me once get out of this scrape and I'll have revenge—I swear it!"

Again and again he repeated the words, but there did not seem much hope of his keeping the vow.

Morning dawned. The scene had not changed, but Edgar's appearance was dreadful. His face was haggard, his eyes bloodshot and swollen, and in such a chaos of aches, he knew not where he felt the most pain.

At times he almost lost consciousness, and his head nodded as though he was falling asleep, but each time the consequent choking aroused him.

Half an hour after daylight a man cautiously approached the gallows-tree. It was Sancho Pedro, in all the glory of his velvet suit and brigandish sombrero. In one hand he carried a rifle, and small weapons showed in his belt.

Close at his heels trotted the same jaguar that he once saw in the cave.

Having gained sight of Edgar, he paused and reflected for a moment, and then made a number of signs which the intelligent animal well understood.

"Go, Blucher, go, old fellow!" said the young outlaw.

Straight ahead went the animal, but not to attack. He had not been so ordered. He ran forward to the rock on which Benson stood, elevated his forward feet to its top, and then, when he remained still unseen, administered a light blow with his paw on the boy's leg.

Light as it was it aroused him, and he looked down and saw Blucher. The sight was a startling one, for he had no means of knowing that he was tame, and a cry fell from his lips.

Sancho Pedro laughed as he saw the fright the jaguar had caused, and then he strode forward and attracted Edgar's attention.

"May I inquire what you are doing here?" he asked, in assumed surprise.

The unfortunate youth could not repress a groan.

"For Heaven's sake, release me!" he said.

"Who put you here?" asked the road-agent, in real or pretended surprise.

"I don't know; I can only say that I am dying."

"You sha'n't die!" the other declared. "I'll release you; I'll give you food and drink; I'll nurse you back to health, and punish those who put you here. But, I say, Benson, just tell me what you know of those missing papers, will you?"

"To perdition with the papers!" cried the prisoner, as he remembered all he had undergone. "I know nothing about them."

"It's false!" shouted Sancho Pedro, furiously. "Fool, will you die through obstinacy? I tell you I'll have your secret or your life! It was I who put you here, last night—I was the masked man—and you can judge whether I am in earnest. Now, listen to me. Do you see Blucher?"

He pointed to the jaguar. The animal had drawn several feet back from the rock, and was looking up into Edgar's face as though longing to attack him.

"I see," he answered coldly.

"Well, unless you open your lips and speak, his claws and teeth shall rend your flesh. Whether he does or not depends on your own course. Give me your secret, or I will lanch the jaguar upon you!" and Sancho pointed at the waiting beast.

It was a terrible scene. The exhausted youth on the rock, the rope about his neck, with the merciless outlaw on the ground, and, near him, the jaguar.

Evidently Blucher was anxious to finish the work. His eyes had a hungry gleam, his teeth

were exposed, and his tail swept back and forth like a fan.

At that moment, however, a rifle cracked sharply, and Sancho Pedro threw up his arms, reeled and fell to the ground, almost touching the jaguar.

Then quick, light steps were heard, and some one sprung upon the rock behind Benson. An arm was placed protectingly around his waist, the rope was severed above his head, and, free at last, he looked into the dusky, earnest face of John Jones.

"Heaven bless you!"

Edgar uttered the words feebly, but the colored boy did not answer. He half-led, half-carried his boy pard to where, a few feet away, fresh, cool water gushed out of the earth.

Then Benson drank of the fluid with the zest only known to those who have similarly suffered. To the thirsty man, nothing is like pure water.

It was several minutes before Edgar showed a disposition to arise; and while he lay there, John bathed his face and hands.

Nature's medicine soon brought back a good deal of his energy, and he arose to his feet.

"Where is Sancho Pedro?" he asked, in an ominous voice.

CHAPTER XII. ON THE TRAIL.

THE boy pards returned to the tree, but both Sancho Pedro and the jaguar had disappeared. Where they had gone was uncertain, but the fact showed that the two friends had no time to lose.

"Reckon we bes' get out ob here," said John. "Ef dat young debbil git a chance to send his men ag'in us, we are gone up, for sure."

There was reason in what he said, and they at once started for Sierra Flat.

As they went the negro told of his adventures on the trail in search of his white pard. It had been mere chance that he found him, however; but he had promptly covered Sancho Pedro, and fired.

What damage that young fienā had received, neither of them knew.

Edgar gained strength as they went, and as the village was neared, he showed little evidence of his late adventure.

"John," he suddenly said, as he paused and took his companion by the arm, "do you know what is to be the result of this series of adventures?"

"No."

"Well, do you think a man justified in seeking revenge?"

"Wal, my ole mammy used ter say it wasn't right, but it's derefful nat'ral."

"Well, John, hear me now when I swear to devote my time to ferreting out this mystery and thwarting the villains in the case. With Sancho Pedro I shall have a personal debt to settle, by-and-by, but I wish first to learn the mystery of these papers so anxiously sought for by the road-agent."

"Mebbe I can help you," said the negro, slowly.

"We will work together, John."

"An' ef you kin find de right parties, you will help her to dis fortune?"

"Of course. There are enough schemers in the case already; we must work on the square and help the cause of the right."

"Wal, den," said Jones, "I am de individual dat tried to bring de papers fou to Sierra Flat?"

"You?"

"Yes, sah."

"What in the world do you mean?"

"Why, you see dat I was de sarvint ob a rich ole gentleman down in Monterey county."

He died a month ago, but afore he crossed de dark riber, he called me an' tole me dat Miss Gypsy Morrison, ob dis town, was his heir-at-law. 'Now,' said he, 'she libes wid Horace Allenton, who is a big rascal. If he hears dat I am dead, he will try to put Gypsy out ob de way an' get dis property hisself. Quinsequently, John, I want you to go to Sierra Flat on de sly, an' gib dese papers to de gal unseen by ebrybody. Dey prove dat she am de heiress, an' all tings nec'sary.'"

"Go on," said Edgar, eagerly.

"Ole massa died," continued the negro, "an' I started fur dis town. I was afeerd dat somebody would rob me, so I put de papers an' de gold-pieces I had, in a corner under de seat. Dar was a nice crack dar, a snug little hidin'-place."

"And so that is why Sancho Pedro could find nothing! Good enough, John: your wit saved the papers. But where are they now?"

"Dat am jest what dis niggah wants to know. I reckon you remember how I slid out ob de winder de first night we was hyar, an' how I brought back de money? Wal, sah, dat was my own money, an' I found it whar I put it, but de papers was gone!"

"Gone?"

"Yes, sah."

"Where could they have gone?"

"Somebody took dem."

"Then they may be in the hands of Allenton."

"I's got a feory in de case."

"What is it?"

"Wal, sah, I reckon de papers went to somebody dat didn't know their value. Ef it had been Allenton, dey wouldn't be arter you now; an' ef it had be'n a t'ief, he would hab took de gold pieces, too."

"That's solid. But, who the dickens can have taken them?"

"Wal, I dunno. Dey was all in a big brown envelope, an' inside ob dat was anudder addressed to Miss Gypsy Morrison."

"In that case, somebody may possibly deliver it to her, so the sooner we see her and tell the whole business, the better."

"Dat's my idee."

After half an hour's further talk, they resumed their way to the village.

Edgar was surprised at his black pard's revelation, but he saw no cause to doubt it. All men, if they possess a grain of common sense, learn, sooner or later, the value of keeping their secrets to themselves, and it was merely creditable to John Jones that he had learned the lesson while so young.

As for their enemies, it was evident that Horace Allenton had somehow learned of the death of the rich man, and that a messenger was on his way to Sierra Flat with important papers, but he had not been able to learn just who that messenger was.

Sancho Pedro was probably a mere agent in the case, but he might yet find that his connection had made dangerous enemies.

The boy pards went to the hotel where Edgar employed a couple of hours in putting himself in good order again. He succeeded so well that he soon felt as well as ever.

When they left the hotel it was in a hurry. They had seen Gypsy Morrison leave her house and move toward the hills.

It was a most fortunate occurrence and they were not long in overtaking her.

She greeted them kindly, even with pleasure, if their eyes did not deceive them, and then Edgar at once proceeded to business. He asked what relatives she had in the southern part of the State, and she answered that Horace Allenton was her only surviving relative in the world, so far as she knew.

Of the rich man of Monterey county she had never heard.

Then Edgar and John, speaking alternatively, told the whole story and Gypsy was informed of the fact that she was really a rich girl. She at first doubted, but ended by believing.

Next came the question of how they had best proceed, and some time was consumed in forming a plan. John's instructions had been to secretly leave Sierra Flat and hasten to Monterey county, as soon as the papers had been placed in Gypsy's hands, taking her with him, of course.

Now that the papers were lost, what should be done?

It was Edgar who settled the matter. He had a strong hope that the missing documents might reappear; so they resolved to wait for a while and see the result.

While waiting, the three would sharply watch.

This much settled, they separated. Gypsy went back to Allenton's, and the boys to their hotel.

Evening brought no change in the situation, but the boy pards were resolved to let no chance escape, so they went to the bar-room to watch the wild revelers as they bowed at the feet of the god, Bacchus.

"Maybe, we'll see some fellow try to light his pipe with the papers," said Edgar, acting on the theory that the articles in question were even then reposing in the pocket of some one who knew not their value.

Sierra Flat was reckoned as below the average of Western towns in point of "liveliness," but it was sufficiently inclined that way to suit a timid man's fancy. The walls of the saloon were full of bullet holes and other relics of the affrays of bygone days, but the lead fever was prone to break out at least once a week and new marks would variegated the dullness of the old ones.

Into this place the young men went with the hope of getting a "clew." They went fearless-

ly, for both were capable of taking care of themselves, but they had no taste for such scenes.

They went to one side, sat down and proceeded to watch the revelers.

So far as they could see, no one took any notice of their arrival, and for half an hour all went well, though they saw no sign of the missing papers.

At the end of that time, two men who had been at the further end of the room arose and walked across the floor. They had evidently been drinking heavily, for their steps were none too true, but they were in the best humor, judging from appearances.

They came very near the boy pards, without seeming to see them, and then there was a stumble and crash as one of them went down on the floor in a heap.

He had fallen when just in front of Edgar, and as the latter believed it but the uncertain movement of a drunken man, a faint smile naturally arose to his face.

It vanished, however, when the fellow sprung to his feet and confronted him with furious anger.

"I say, you young villain, what do you mean by that?" he roared.

"By what, sir?" Benson politely, but calmly, asked.

"By trippin' me up!"

"You are mistaken, sir; I did not trip you."

"I say you did!" roared the man, shaking his fist in the youth's face.

"My feet were drawn wholly back out of your way, sir."

"I kin sw'ar to dat, myself," said John Jones.

"Silence, you black monkey. Wait for your turn; I'll settle your case bime-by. See yer, you white puppy, that runs with a black one, you've called me a liar an' I'm goin' ter lick you fur it."

"Pardon me, but I have not called you a liar," said Benson, quietly, but without flinching.

"I say you have, an' I'm goin' ter beat you to a jelly. I'll walk right over yer, arter which you'll be as flat as a floor-board. You hear me?"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FIGHTING PARDS.

THE loud talk of the man who claimed to have been tripped had by this time attracted the attention of all in the room, and as fighting is the pet pleasure of the average miner, cards and bottles were promptly deserted and a ring formed around the chief actors in the scene.

The man who was causing all this trouble, and who seemed to be named Burns, was solidly backed by his friend, while the boy pards kept their place on the bench and seemed reluctant to engage in trouble.

Luckily, however, the sympathies of the crowd were at once given them.

They had been long enough at the Flat to be regarded as citizens, while the men who were trying to bully them were utter strangers, and we have already seen that strangers were not popular in that section.

Consequently, many a dark look was given to Burns and his companion.

"Billee, old man," said a grizzled gold-digger, to his next neighbor, "I reckon you an' me will hev ter chip in."

"Wait a bit, Tom. That youngster is no slouch. Let's see what he'll do, an' then chip in at ther crisis."

Burns did not long delay hostilities. Hedrew back his fist with a quick motion and sent out a terrific blow, calculated for the head of the quiet young man, who had not yet moved; but the latter's hand darted upward and the stroke was skillfully passed over his shoulder, to spend its force on the hard wall.

Burns uttered a howl of pain, and at the same moment Edgar slipped past him, gained position, and stood at bay. Erect and fearless, he faced the ruffian with flashing eyes, which told that he was at last fully aroused.

"Bravo fur ther boyee!"

"Stand yer ground, young feller!"

"Hoorah fur ther leetle bantam!"

Such were the cries which arose from the crowd, and Benson began to breathe freer.

Some years before he had received instruction from an adept boxer, and he knew that unless this noisy ruffian was equally "scientific" he could take care of himself, despite the odds of years.

Burns at once wheeled. His fist had been bruised by contact with the wall, and he meant to take revenge on the boy for his injury.

He rushed at him, striking out awkwardly

with both fists, but he hit only the air, and then another series of shouts arose from the crowd as Benson dodged under the brawny arm of his enemy, escaping all punishment.

The ruffian turned and looked at him with mingled surprise, rage and vindictiveness; he was like a buffalo bull wounded in his obstinate head, and anxious to do more damage than seemed possible.

"So that's your game!" he roared. "You're a slippery eel, be you? You don't stand up for a fair fight, but you dodge an' run."

"If you don't like my style go and sit down," retorted the youth.

"I'll smash your head," Burns reiterated.

"Not with my consent."

The rough looked at him in silence for a while, as though wondering how he could get at so slippery a customer, and then he moved slowly forward.

On his face was a cunning smile, and it was clear that he meant to force an open fight and give no chance for dodging.

Benson stood with his hands in faultless position, and he had never been cooler. He felt himself the superior of the bully, and he intended to prove it if further trouble was forced upon him.

Burns measured his distance, and then his right fist shot out in sledge-hammer fashion. It was, however, but a feint, and in a twinkling his left followed in a crashing blow.

His idea was a good one, but his execution was miserable.

Edgar, scarcely stirring from his tracks, warded off both blows, and then the rough experienced a singular sensation in his teeth as he received a stinging blow in return.

"Hoorah for ther little 'un!"

"Name him Fightin' Benson!"

"Did he break your china, mister?"

These cries from the crowd maddened Burns and he rushed forward and sent out blow after blow, resolved to beat down his slight opponent and crush him out of shape.

The result showed the futility of human plans.

"Fighting Benson," alternately parrying and dodging, evaded every blow, and, suddenly, Burns went crashing to the floor, felled like an ox in the shambles.

Then his young adversary, fully aroused at last, stood awaiting his next attack with flashing eyes and compressed lips.

Burns gained a sitting position and paused to wipe his eyes. The blow had fallen fairly on the bridge of his nose, filling his eyes with tears, and he felt the need of a clear vision before going further.

At last he arose and, with a volley of curses, rushed at the boy pugilist, but, before the first of his blows had been delivered, down he went again with a force that made the tables and chairs rattle.

Thus far, his companion had stood apart, but now he rushed at Edgar with a wicked light in his eyes.

The movement brought John Jones to the front. He grasped the fellow's arm and held him back, a resolute look on his dark face.

Down to his belt went the ruffian's hand, and, in a moment more, an ugly-looking knife flashed in the light. It arose, while murder flamed in his eyes, but a slight crack followed and he fell like a log, once more knocking down his friend, who was gathering his feet beneath him.

John Jones's fist had produced this last effect.

There were men present who suspected what would follow. The affair had reached the point where revolvers usually come into play, and the crowd "drew" very freely.

Their judgment had been good. Up came the roughs, weapons in hand, and for a moment the case looked bad for the boy pards.

Crack! crack!

Two shots led the music, and others chimed in, loud yells arose and the crowd hurled themselves upon Burns and his fellow assassin.

For a few minutes confusion reigned and arms and legs arose promiscuously above the knot of fighting men, and then all fell back; the fight was over.

It had been as tragic as such affairs usually are. Burns lay dead on the floor and his friend, bleeding from two wounds, was a close prisoner. Some of the miners were hurt, but not seriously.

Edgar Benson lacked the slightest of scratches, to tell of the affray, but John Jones had a bullet hole through his hat which would have been in his head had he not ducked so promptly when his enemy covered him with his revolver.

The emotions of the miners were at fever heat, and some one suggested a rope for the survivor of the roughs.

At this point, Benson came to the front.

"I have a suspicion in this case," he clearly said. "This fight was forced upon me, and I believe these men were here for that purpose. They pretended to be drunk, at first, but it was a sham. Next, yonder fellow claimed that I tripped him, when I did not touch him in the slightest degree. His pard, who still lives, may now wish to explain."

Evidently, the fellow had no such wish, for he swore that the fight was not premeditated, even as he clung to the assertion that Burns had been tripped.

Just then, John Jones advanced, holding a scrap of white paper in his hand.

"I's found dis in de pocket ob dat critter," he explained, "an' dar seems to be sutlin' in it."

Benson took the paper, which was commercial note, and found it covered with writing. He read as follows:

"SANCHO PEDRO:—Those cussed boys are still at Driscoll's Hotel, and they are poking their noses into every crack and corner. If you can send two men to force a quarrel upon and kill them, I will—"

Here the note ended abruptly, the lower part having been torn off.

It was, however, enough to throw a good deal of light on the subject.

Edgar held it toward the miners and read the visible portion aloud.

"Some one has torn the letter in two," he added, "and we have no means of knowing the writer at present. This fellow, though, is clearly one of Sancho Pedro's men, and he can tell the truth if he will."

A violent trembling had seized upon the prisoner and his face was ashen. He knew just how much mercy he might expect, for Sancho Pedro was cordially hated wherever he operated, and it was no wonder he shook.

The miners turned on him in fury and he grasped at his only visible hope of escape.

"Ef I tell all will you free me?"

A moment's hesitation followed, and then all looked at Edgar.

"That depends on how much you know. Can you tell who wrote this note?"

The prisoner hesitated, in turn, and finally admitted that he could not. Benson, watching him keenly, was convinced that he spoke the truth, and, in this, he was right.

Situated as he was, the fellow would have been delighted to give full particulars, gain his liberty and then flee from the country.

CHAPTER XIV.

FOLLOWING THE CLEW.

AFTER due deliberation, the miners decided to consign their captive to prison without treating with him. Plainly, he was one of Sancho Pedro's men, but he had evidently come to the Flat knowing no more than that his chief had sent him.

Had Burns been alive, he might possibly have told more.

The boy pards adjourned to their room, and then Benson drew out the letter, which he had retained.

"Kin you make anyt'ing out ob dat?" asked the negro.

"I'm going to try, though the trail looks blind. It is plain to me that the writing is disguised."

"How can you tell dat?"

"Well, when a man disguises his writing, it assumes a peculiarity easier understood by an expert, than described. I believe this to be such a case. The letters and words, though well-formed, look cramped and unnatural."

John stared at his companion in surprise. He was quick-witted, himself, but not especially so where penmanship was concerned.

"Now, I'll tell you what I see here," continued Edgar. "This letter was written by a man of education. The writing is even and flowing, and the words are correctly spelled. An educated man may assume ignorance, but an ignorant man can't assume education."

"By golly! ole Allenton writ de letter!"

"Y a prick the marrow of my opinion now. Yes, I believe Allenton was the writer. There is another item which counts that way. This is regular note paper, clean and neatly folded. Had the writer been a common miner, it is not likely he would have had writing-paper, or, if he had, it would have been soiled and greasy, from long kicking around his hut."

"Golly! you ought ter be a lawyer," said John, admiringly.

"Perhaps you can point out our next step," John reflected.

"Ef we can find out who uses writin' paper—"

"That's the idea. Now, you see this sheet is ruled with pink lines, instead of blue, as is usually the case. Here is a slight clew. Come with me, John!"

They arose, left the hotel and went to a little store kept by one Tin Wah, a Chinaman. He sold various kinds of notions, and was the only dealer of the kind in the village.

The pards entered and Edgar made known his want.

Tin Wah laid out a quire of stationery, but it was a common article, ruled with blue.

Benson examined it critically.

"This don't suit me," he finally said. "Let me see your other kind."

"Dis welly good paper," Tin Wah said.

"Splendid, John, splendid; but I banker for the other. Please trot it out."

He was talking at a venture, but his artifice succeeded well. The Chinaman raised a big box of pink-ruled commercial note, and even John Jones perceived that he had been anxious to dispose of the first lot because it was only a remnant.

The pink-ruled was a new acquisition.

Benson grew more hopeful. He purchased a small amount, threw down a coin which would have purchased the paper three times over, and told Tin Wah to keep the change.

The Chinaman's heart was touched.

"Do you sell much of this stuff?" the young detective asked, carelessly.

"Berry little. Melican man not lite many letters."

"That lot is new, eh?"

"Yes. You first man dat buy."

"I reckon there was one ahead of me. That package was broken, you know. Don't you remember any one buying of you?"

The Chinaman looked blank and then brightened. He did remember. On the previous day Horace Allenton had purchased two quires of him.

"Are you sure he is the only person to whom you have sold?"

Tin Wah was sure; but, to settle the matter, he counted the half-quires remaining in the broken package. Exactly the quantity he had said, was gone.

The pards went back to the room.

"That much is settled," said Edgar. "Allenton bought his paper of Tin Wah and wrote to Sancho Pedro to kill us. It is as plain as day."

"Yes; an' I reckon it's purty plain dat we will be in hot water while we stay hyar."

"John, what in the world has become of those missing papers? If we had them you could take Gypsy and at once leave Sierra Flat."

"I's been sinkin on de subject, but I can't get no light. Once I thought de stage-driver might hab taken dem to wipe de grease from de ends ob de axle, when puttin' on fresh grease, but dough I 'zamed ebery t'ing in his shed, I found nuffin ob dem."

Benson did not answer. He relapsed into thought, and tried in various ways to account for the disappearance of the papers. He was sure that they had not reached Allenton's hands; but where were they?

It did not seem possible that any jar or jolt of the wagon could have lost them out on the road.

No; he felt sure they had been removed by human hands, and that, too, by those of some one who was ignorant of their value. Naturally, a person finding an envelope filled with papers of an official look would hasten to learn what they were, and in this case, to read was to see their importance.

"I'll bet any money that the package fell into the hands of some one who can't read—he may have them all now, safe and sound—but there are probably twenty men in camp who are as unlearned as that," said Edgar.

This was about as far as their investigation went that night, and they sought their bed at an early hour to gain needed sleep.

When they appeared for their breakfast the next morning, they found they had been elevated to the level of heroes. The men of Sierra Flat liked people of courage, and when two boys showed such skill and nerve, the rough miners were ready and anxious to give them due praise.

Hence, the two were gravely informed that they had been given the sobriquet of "The Fighting Pards," and were invited to take part in the christening by imbibing over Tim Driscoll's bar.

Then that gentleman handed a letter to Benson.

On the envelope was his name in a fine, femi-

nine hand, which at once aroused his interest, and he hastened to open it.

A sheet of pink-ruled commercial note-paper lay in his hand!

The significance of this was evident, however, when he saw the name of Gypsy Morrison at the end, and he at once read it.

Briefly, it informed him that the writer had news of importance to communicate, and he was requested to meet her at a designated time and place.

Edgar read the note twice and then studied it for a while. He knew he had cause for great vigilance, and this might be a decoy sent by his enemies, but he finally decided that it had really been written by Gypsy.

At the first opportunity he read it to John, and they prepared to keep the appointment.

Ten o'clock was the hour named by the writer, and the pards were prompt. They went to the gulch she had named, and in a short time Gypsy herself appeared.

Benson was a little surprised at the pleasure with which he saw her approach, but he was becoming more interested in pretty Gypsy than he realized.

In her own cheeks there was an increased color as she held out her hand, but she had come on business and they let little time go to waste.

Her information may be briefly stated.

The previous evening, after she had retired, she heard her guardian receive a guest, and as she had her suspicions in the case, she did not hesitate to arise and secure a view of the caller.

He proved to be Sancho Pedro, and from their talk, she learned that they were indeed leagued together as had been suspected. The road-agent was working in the interests of Allenton solely as a hired man; and, moreover, they were as much perplexed as any one to know where the missing papers were.

CHAPTER XV.

BLUCHER HOLDS THE FORT.

THERE was nothing new or startling about the news brought by Gypsy, but it served to confirm the suspicions of the boy pards. Henceforth, there would be no doubt as to their proper mode of procedure. Allenton stood branded as a plotter against human life, as the deadly enemy of his ward, and as an ally of Sancho Pedro.

Consequently, any extreme measure against that schemer would be perfectly proper.

"The only stumbling-block now in our path is that coming from the loss of the papers," said Edgar. "If we had them, we could slip away from Sierra Flat quietly, or we could tell the miners what sort of a man Allenton is and trust to them to take care of him."

"They had taken an interest in us," said John, "and they would back us up in a fight."

"That's solid," his pard agreed.

"Are these papers absolutely necessary?" asked Gypsy, thoughtfully.

"That's the great conundrum. Old Mr. Dexter told John they were very important, and would prove your right to the property, but it seems probable to me that your claim could be proved without them."

"I move dat we levant at onc't," said John.

Before any one could answer, something struck lightly at their feet and all grew startled as they saw the spotted form of a jaguar. A cry had arisen to Gypsy's lips, but it died away as the animal fawned upon her, acting much like a great dog that is overjoyed at meeting a friend.

She instinctively put out her hand, and he ran his great tongue over it with mute assertions of fidelity. She recognized the animal which had before appeared to her in the hills, and the conviction grew upon her that she was safe with him.

The pards had drawn their revolvers, but they paused as they saw what followed.

Edgar, however, was not slow to recognize the terrible pet of the road-agents. He had seen him when John Jones put him to flight with the torch, and, again, with Sancho Pedro under the gallows-tree.

Gypsy hastened to narrate her own experience with him, and then Edgar plainly saw that some strange freak had caused the animal to take a fancy to her.

"His name is Blucher," said the youth. "Call him thus."

She obeyed, and the jaguar frisked about with every demonstration of joy. He rolled on the

ground, rubbed his head against her hand and purred like a gigantic cat.

"He is no mean friend to have," said Gypsy with sparkling eyes.

"A mighty protector, as long as he is loyal, but I doubt his being trusty."

"Golly! I wouldn't like him to be a bed-feller," said John.

"Wait!" said Edgar. "I have an idea. We are not the only persons who have cause to hate and fear Sancho Pedro. He has been the scourge of the miners of Sierra Flat. They have often gone out to hunt him down, but have never been able to find his cave. Now, they would gladly follow whoever could show them the entrance to the cave—why can't Blucher be used as a guide?"

It was a happy thought. The jaguar, of course, knew the secrets of the cave perfectly; he could lead them there if he would. With such a plan in mind, the great question was—would he do it?

The trio were discussing the probability of the case very earnestly when a new voice broke in on their privacy.

"Hands up! We hold you covered, and it's surrender or die! Which do you choose?"

The pards had wheeled at the first words, but what they saw was not reassuring. A dozen rifles were covering their persons, and back of them, as many men stood ready to press the triggers.

A little in front of the others stood Sancho Pedro, a mocking smile on his evil, but handsome face.

"Careful with your hands. Put them up, I say!"

The second command was sufficient; the boy pards, fighters though they might be, were not foolish enough to provoke certain death. In the language of the West, the enemy "held the drop," and the muzzles of the rifles never quivered.

Sancho Pedro laughed mockingly.

"Now, then, this is a sight worth seeing. You two bantams, who fought like fiends last night, are now as meek as Moses. Why, where's your backbone?"

"Give me a fair chance and I'll show you," said Edgar, in a deep voice. "All I ask, Sancho Pedro, is to meet you as man to man. You have seen fit to torture me with devilish skill, and I have sworn to have revenge. I'll meet you with knife, revolver or empty hands; all I ask is a chance."

"You'll never get it, for I intend to leave your bones in this gulch. I am going to assume your role of lover toward the charming Gypsy. I'll marry her and roll in the wealth old Dexter left."

"Never," the girl exclaimed.

"Never is a long day; don't be too sure of the future. I say it is to be so."

"I'll kill you first," flashed the girl.

The young outlaw did not answer. He had changed his gaze to Blucher, who was crouched at Gypsy's feet. This position the jaguar had taken as soon as his master appeared, but there had been no pleasure in his face.

Instead, his joyful spirits had abruptly vanished and there was a menacing expression on his brute features.

"Come here, Blucher!" said Sancho Pedro.

The jaguar did not stir.

"Come here, sir, I say!"

The outlaw spoke more sharply, but the only sign that he was heard was a parting of Blucher's lips.

His master stamped angrily on the ground.

"Come here, you rascal, or I will flog you!" he shouted, with a menacing gesture.

Then Blucher partially arose, but threw himself into position for a leap. His spotted fur moved along his neck, forming a ruffle, and an ominous snarl broke from his lips.

Sancho Pedro retreated several steps precipitately.

Instantly a plan of salvation flashed upon Gypsy. Because of his sudden fancy for her, the jaguar had turned against his master. Might not that fact be used to save them all?

"Good Blucher! good fellow!" she said, in her tenderest voice.

The jaguar responded at once. He gave her to understand that he heard and appreciated her kind words, but at the same time he kept close watch of Sancho Pedro.

Gypsy was so much encouraged that she knelt by his side, put her arms about his neck and caressed his head.

"You had better keep back, Mr. Sancho Pedro," she said, bravely.

"Have you bewitched that brute?" he demanded.

"I have bound him to my service."

"I should say so. He is my own property, and I don't understand this freak of his."

"To me all is plain. He has tired of serving such a master; robbers and assassins are not to his taste for friends."

Gypsy spoke boldly, but the road-agent did not heed her. He was looking thoughtfully at Blucher. After a little reflection he advanced and tried to win back his allegiance with soft words, but the jaguar was not to be deceived.

He snarled and started forward a pace, and once more his master fell back.

"Curse the brute! I'll soon end his career. Here, Brown, shoot him through the head."

"Thank ye, cap'n," the man replied, "but I don't keer fur ther job. Ef I fired an' missed, who would eat my soup ter-night? No jaguar shootin' fur me, ef you please."

Sancho Pedro then called forward half his men to execute the order, but Gypsy put both arms around Blucher's neck, preventing a shot.

The boy ruffian was furious. He wished to kill Edgar and John and abduct Gypsy, but the jaguar stood like a rock in the way. He had planned to make the girl his wife, and he would not run any risk of injuring her.

Another misfortune now occurred to the bold road-agent. In the warfare against Blucher, Edgar and John had been forgotten for the time, and they had not let their opportunity pass.

"Sancho Pedro, look this way!" suddenly said a stern voice.

The young road-agent wheeled and saw Edgar covering him with a pair of revolvers, while John Jones paid similar attention to the other men.

On their own part, they were no longer targets.

"Hold hard, sir outlaw," continued Edgar. "Keep your hands from your weapons, and the same to any of your men who would draw a bead. We hold the drop now, and we're going to keep it. The first person who raises a hand against us dies in his tracks!"

A furious oath fell from Sancho Pedro's lips, but he dared not buck against the powers that were. Despite the force of numbers, he knew the fighting pards had the game in their own hands.

"You are my prisoner," said Edgar, firmly.

"Your prisoner?"

"Exactly."

"Well, what of it?"

"Nothing, except that you are all going to camp with us."

"Do you intend ter take us there?"

"I do, sir."

Sancho Pedro broke into a laugh, but it was an unmusical and uneasy one.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE JAGUAR GUIDE.

THERE was plainly a good deal of consternation among the road-agents, but Edgar Benson, bravely as he talked, had little hope of accomplishing his expressed intention. The odds were so greatly against them that he would have been delighted had he seen any way of parting from the human brutes without injury to his own party.

His boast was really only intended to strengthen his position.

Sancho Pedro began to storm, but the Gordian knot was cut by outside means. There was a sudden shout just beyond the chief actors in the drama, a rattling of bullets and cracking of rifles, and then one-half of the outlaws went down lifeless.

Another moment and, with wild cheers, half a dozen of the men of Sierra Flat came bounding over the rocks, firing their revolvers as they ran.

It was a terrible slaughter for the road-agents, who did not offer to strike a blow in defense, but took to their heels and went as fast and as far as they could.

Both the fighting pards added lead to the general contribution, and, on the whole, it was a very bad day for the mountain robbers.

Blucher stood erect and snarled continuously, his eyes full of fire, and only Gypsy's restraining hold kept him from dashing away in pursuit.

Judging from appearances, he had abandoned the gang forever.

None of the miners stopped; they dashed away on the trail and our young friends were left as the only living persons on the field.

Dead men were there in abundance, however; nine of the thirteen road-agents would go no more upon the trail; but Sancho Pedro was not among the slain.

"This will prove a terrible blow to the gang," said Edgar, "and I believe if Blucher can be made to guide us to the cave, the miners may now strike their foes so heavily that they will never recover from the stroke."

"By golly! it am wuff tryin'," John asserted.

The trio started for the town, but they had gone but a few steps when the miners returned from their pursuit. The four surviving road-agents had made good their escape.

One of the miners so pleased Edgar that he decided to tell him the whole story of the trouble caused by Horace Allenton. The man, who was named Bird, was just the person to lead in an important enterprise.

As a result, the story was plainly told, the boys pards and Gypsy acting as narrators by turns, and nothing was kept back, not even the disappearance of the papers.

They had made no mistake. The sympathies of Bird and the other miners were at once aroused, and they promptly advocated a relentless war on Allenton and Sancho Pedro. The latter was not a favorite at Sierra Flat, and all would be glad to see him humbled.

As a result, Gypsy went to Bird's house, instead of back to Allenton's, and a meeting of miners was convened to consider the latter's crimes.

Bird was outspoken against him, and Lyman, Higgins and Strout, of the stage adventure, added their voices; and as a result, the population arose in a body and marched to the house.

Allenton was taken out and forced to listen to the story of his crimes. Everything was clearly told, and he was shown the fragment of the letter he had written to the boy road-agent asking him to kill the fighting pards.

Before this accusation all the man's courage gave way, and he declared his innocence in wild words. There was, however, no room to doubt. In the interview with Sancho Pedro, overheard by Gypsy, his own unwary tongue had betrayed all, even to the authorship of the letter.

After devoting a proper length of time to him, he was consigned to a room in the jail with five men for a guard; after which the rest of the gold-diggers prepared to go on the trail.

The jaguar had refused to leave Gypsy, but Bird had thought of a simple way of gaining the animal's good will. Edgar Benson remained with Gypsy, and, forgetting how nearly the robber's pet had once come to ending his life, did all he could to win his confidence.

At last all was ready for the start, and twenty-four miners, fully armed, only awaited their dumb guide to march against Sancho Pedro.

Blucher was reluctant to leave Gypsy. He crouched at her feet—nor would he be called away by Benson; but his good training was proved at the end.

Gypsy told him to "Go home!" as she would a dog, and, only protesting by a look, Blucher obeyed.

Plainly, the command was a familiar one to him.

And thus the war-party started up the mountain, led by the jaguar, and closely followed by the boy pards, Bird, Lyman, Higgins, and the others.

Once beyond the village, the strange guide seemed to forget Gypsy entirely, and was contented while Edgar was near him. He went forward without hesitation, always choosing the easiest paths, but so shaping his course that the miners no longer felt a doubt.

Barring accidents, they were pretty sure of being led to Sancho Pedro's lair.

In the meanwhile, the young outlaw and his three surviving men had reached their stronghold, weary, disheartened, and angry. The nine men lost in the gulch had made a great gap in their band.

The boy captain went at once to his private room. First of all he took a great draught from a whisky-filled flask, and then he flung himself in a chair.

"I have now to decide a great question," he muttered. "Shall I, or shall I not, give up Gypsy Morrison? She is pretty and intelligent, she pleases me and is rich, but she hates me. What shall I do? If I take up with her, Inez must be made way with, and no other woman will serve me so devotedly as she has done. Her loyalty is undying. Which of the two shall I choose?"

For half an hour he remained deep in thought, and then he arose, drank again from the flask and began pacing the room.

He had, however, settled the previous ques-

tion; a new and complicated one was being considered.

In the midst of his meditations, Inez entered the room and came to his side. She looked into his face with tender, pitying eyes, but he met her with a kiss and a smile.

Young as they both were, she was his wife, and he had cared for her as much as he could care for any one. The thought of how he had been tempted to doom her to death made his demonstration more than usually sincere.

He led her to a seat as though she had been a queen of more than outlaws.

"You have heard the news?" he questioned.

"Yes," she said, caressing his hand.

"Do you know the extent of our loss?"

"Nine men, they told me."

"Ay, that was the number. Nine brave, true souls we left dead in the gulch. It was the fiend's own luck. Inez, can you account for it?"

"Not in particular."

"Well, I wish to call your attention to the fact that all this trouble has occurred since those infernal 'fighting pards,' as they call them, first entered here. Before that, not one of my plans had miscarried, and not a prisoner had escaped from the cave."

"We were lucky."

"The luck changed with their coming. The whole lot of prisoners escaped, and every scheme I have formed has failed. Now, nearly half our band dies at one stroke."

"I am so sorry," said Inez.

"Next," added Sancho Pedro, gloomily, "I suppose they will find the entrance to the cave."

"I do not believe any man can do that. Those prisoners who escaped did so in the night and, luckily, cannot retrace their steps. Have courage, Pedro, *querido*; our good luck will return."

"Your words give me fresh hope."

"It will be necessary for you to be very careful for a while."

"I suppose so. Yes, I'll let Allenton work his own plots; I'll lay low. And yet—yet—"

He paused and scowled darkly.

"Yet what, Pedro?" Inez asked.

"That accursed Benson does not leave Sierra Flat alive, or if he does slip through my fingers, I'll hunt him down if I give him the death-shot in the streets of San Francisco!"

"I am sorry I did not succeed in winning him over when I pretended to be your sister," said Inez, smiling faintly.

"He wavered; but he is a mere lump of ice. But come with me, my queen; I wish to watch for signs of my enemies. They may still be in pursuit."

Arm in arm they went to the entrance.

This place, which was concealed by bushes and vines, as well as by artificial means, opened into the head of a gulch.

The road-agent stepped forward, and standing beneath a spreading tree, looked down the gulch. Then a furious look crossed his face, and he uttered an oath.

"What is the matter?" Inez faintly asked.

"There is matter enough; we are doomed," replied Sancho Pedro. "That infernal jaguar is guiding the miners to our cave. Quick! bring a rifle. I must shoot him before it is too late!"

CHAPTER XVII.

SANCHO PEDRO AT BAY!

INEZ needed no second bidding. She darted back into the cave, and the road-agent continued to watch his enemies. They were winding along the rocky gulch with Blucher at their front, but so near now that no decent marksman could miss.

The boyish face of the outlaw grew fiendish of expression, and his lips curled back from his teeth.

"Oh, if I only had the means of making this gulch a grave for all! How I hate them! But I am not yet taken. I have eleven good men left, and once the jaguar is dead no one can find the entrance. I will hang on their track with my braves; I'll pick them off one by one—Where is the rifle?"

No wonder he grew impatient. The men of Sierra Flat had advanced very near. He recognized Benson and Jones at their head.

A curse fell from his lips, but just then Inez reappeared. She hurried to his side, bearing the rifle, panting and breathless.

"I had to go clear to the magazine—" she began.

"Never mind; you are in time, and I will soon settle this matter," said the road-agent, as he pushed the weapon forward.

Steadying his aim against the tree, he covered

the body of the brute guide and took careful aim.

"May the holy Virgin speed the shot!" uttered Inez.

"Our lives depend on my aim," said Sancho Pedro; "the jaguar must die!"

He pressed the trigger.

Click!

The hammer fell, but no report followed; the weapon had missed fire.

"*Mil demonias!*" hissed the outlaw. "Are we doomed? Quick, woman, a cartridge!"

Inez handed one, and he shoved it into place as quickly as possible, but for once his nerves had become upset. His hands shook so he could scarcely hold the rifle, and when he thrust it forward, the sight of his enemies only a few feet away was not calculated to add to his composure.

The appearance of Blucher had grown ominous. Something seemed to warn him that he was no longer approaching his former home as a friend. He marched slowly, and his keen eyes swept every visible point of rock and land.

The miners, too, were on the alert; his aspect told them the crisis was at hand.

Once more Sancho Pedro pressed the trigger, but it had been with the rifle barrel shaking like a reed in the wind.

The result was not surprising, for to one side sped the harmless shot.

Was it harmless? To the miners and their guide it was so, but it brought about a startling result.

Almost instantly a terrible scream burst from the jaguar's lips, and he crouched for a spring, his eyes flashing furiously; then up, and forward he went like a cannon-ball, crashing through the branches of the tree.

Sancho Pedro had one glimpse of a yellowish object shooting through the air, and then he was beaten to the earth by the jaguar's weight.

For one moment it looked as though the minutes of the boy road-agent were numbered, but strangely enough, Blucher did not follow up his attack.

To Inez this was not remarkable; she had seen that the jaguar had struck his head against the tree as he fell upon her husband, and, though such a thing was most unexpected, it seemed that he was stunned, as he lay motionless.

"Quick!" cried the woman. "Throw off the carcass; there is yet time to escape. To the cave! to the cave!"

She gave her aid, and Sancho Pedro released himself; they bounded toward the cave entrance, and disappeared.

They were none too soon. Another moment, and the miners broke through the bushes, eager and excited.

Blucher was on his feet, but he shook his head and reeled as he tried to walk. Still, he did not forget that he was bound for the interior of the cave, and he moved forward, with the men at his heels.

Bird, the leader of the miners, was just in time to see Sancho Pedro swinging into place a bowlder which would have blocked their way, and he fired his revolver, and sprang boldly forward.

A moment more and his person and the form of the jaguar formed a living impediment to the further working of the patent door.

He struggled for a moment, and then the bowlder rolled wholly away, revealing a clear road through the passage.

Whatever had been the effect of his shot, it had at least had one good result—the boy road-agent had taken to flight.

The miners pressed inside, rejoicing that one step had been gained, but by no means inclined to think all trouble over.

Blucher had deserted them and bounded away in advance, so they must now do without his aid, and in that direction all was dark and silent.

"We must have torches," said a cautious miner.

"No," said Higgins. "Make a rush an' hit 'em hard afore they hev time tew prepare for fight."

The suggestion was favorably received, and along the dark passage rushed the whole party.

"Golly! dis am pokerish business!" John Jones said to Edgar.

"Hold your breath and sail in. It's do or die now," the latter answered.

Fifty feet they went and a light appeared; a little further and they emerged into a spacious cave chamber.

It was lighted by torches which threw a dull light on ragged walls, low roof and natural pillars, but no road-agents were visible.

"Where now?" Bird asked, pausing.

"This way," answered Higgins, turning to the right. "I remember this hole; follow me!"

The correctness of his judgment was soon proved. Out of a niche rushed a dozen desperate men with Sancho Pedro at their head. Revolvers and knives were in their hands, and the music at once began.

With such men there could be no half-way work. No words were wasted, but the sounds of revolver shot and clashing steel at once sounded and the wide cave-chamber took up the echoes.

At the first, Sancho Pedro's gaze wandered in search of Edgar Benson. Even then he did not forget his hatred. He saw him, and a fierce joy flashed over his face. Up came his revolver, with the muzzle not five feet from his target.

He did not press the trigger. With a great leap, John Jones sprang forward, struck up his arm and the weapon went flying away over the crowd.

Then the negro struck out, straight and sure, and the road-agent dropped.

The fighting pards sprung forward together, but the negro suddenly fell, and Inez rushed forward with a revolver in each hand, firing rapidly.

Believing his partner dead, Benson sprang toward her, resolved to risk all, but just then a surge of the battle caught and bore him away from the spot.

He saw the arm of a burly ruffian raised above him, holding a knife, but he sprung aside and then knocked the fellow down with his naked fist.

Even as before, the surging mass of fighting men brushed him aside. Revolvers cracked and knives clashed. It was the old scene and sound of battle.

Then a cheer arose from the miners. They found themselves without an enemy with whom to fight. Several outlaws lay dead at their feet; the others had watched their opportunity and slipped away.

The victors looked around, one thought in each mind.

"Where is Sancho Pedro?"

No one could answer the question, for no one had seen him go; but Edgar Benson, who had been surprised to find John alive and unharmed, pointed to one of the passages leading from the chamber.

"Yonder is the way to his private room. You may find him there."

"Come on!" said Bird.

He strode forward, with the fighting pards by his side, and they soon reached the room of the chief.

The scene which there met their gaze caused them to pause.

Upon his couch, half sitting and half lying, Sancho Pedro was awaiting their arrival. Beyond a doubt he was near death, for he had a terrible wound near one temple and the blood was flowing fast, but his courage did not waver.

In each hand he held a revolver, and the muzzles were covering the door.

Beside his couch, her arms around his body, her face pillowed on his breast, knelt Inez, and her piteous moans checked the battle fury of the intruders.

Crack! crack!

Two shots rung out in succession, for twice had Sancho Pedro pulled the trigger, but, fired with his last strength, they flew wild and no damage was done.

Simultaneous with the shots, the revolvers fell from his nerveless hands, his head fell back and his earthly battles were over.

Still the miners did not stir, for, as bitterly as they had hunted the boy road-agent, the sorrow of the woman—the girl-wife—who knelt by his side, went straight to their rough, but kindly hearts.

"Let us leave them," said Edgar, touching Bird on the arm. "He can do no harm, and we have no war against her."

"Right, boy, right!" was the earnest reply.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW THE MISSING PAPERS CAME BACK.

THE miners left the room and went to the main chamber, there to discover the fruits of victory.

As near as they could judge, not more than five of the road-agents had escaped, and as Sancho Pedro was not alive to reorganize the band, there was little fear that Sierra Flat would again be troubled with road-robbers.

A search of the cave revealed a good many articles of value, the spoils of lawless raids, but

no money whatever except what was in the pockets of the dead.

Whether the members of the band had been in the habit of burying their "dust" in the cave, or carrying it promptly away to another place, none of our friends ever knew.

At last, ready to leave the place, they thought of Inez and hesitated as to their proper course. Not one of them had a desire to harm her, but was it well to leave her in the cave?

After a consultation, they decided to visit her and offer, in a spirit of friendship, an escort from the neighborhood of Sierra Flat.

They went to the door and then grew horrified anew. The dead boy chief lay as they had left him, and Inez was still on his breast, but a change had come over her.

As still as the man she had loved was she and when they saw the red line down the side of her face they knew the truth.

Unwilling to survive him whom she had loved well, if not wisely, she had taken her own life with the revolver which had fallen from his nerveless hand.

The young outlaw and his girl-wife lay dead together.

Nor was this all.

At their feet crouched a lithe, sinewy form, with spotted back and yellowish belly—the jaguar, Blucher.

Removing their hats, the rough miners advanced, but the front of the jaguar at once became menacing. He paraded arose and, revealing his wicked-looking teeth, uttered a note of warning before which they retreated.

Once more he was on guard, but this time, as he believed, in defense of the master and mistress to whom he had been temporarily unfaithful.

Edgar Benson and the others spoke to him kindly, but he had evidently forgotten them, and no coaxing could make him allow them to approach the bodies.

"Let him alone," said Bird at last. "Why should we disturb this couple who are united in death as in life? This rocky chamber is a fit sepulcher—let us leave them here."

The plan was approved and they went out and at once left the cave.

Sierra Flat was reached in due time, and the place went wild with joy over the news they brought.

At last the terrible road-agent band was destroyed, and the town was free from its scourge.

After a little time spent in rejoicing, Bird reminded the people that Horace Allenton was in prison, and that the crime of attempted murder was proved against him.

What should be his fate?

After some deliberation, Bird and ten other men were appointed a jury to retire and consider his fate. Before they went, Bird came to Edgar Benson.

"Young man," said he, "I take it you are a good deal of a scholar, and we want you to write out a full account of the death of the road-agents. We had petitioned to the Governor for a force to clean 'em out, and now he must be notified that his help is not needed. Will you go to Tin Wah's and get paper and ink and write the account?"

Edgar, of course, agreed, and, accompanied by John Jones, went over to the Chinaman's store. He recognized them, and grinned broadly.

"Wantee more plaper?" he asked.

Edgar said they did, and a sufficient quantity was soon procured.

"Now give me an envelope," he added.

Tin Wah passed one over the counter.

"That's too small. Haven't you a bigger one?"

"Me got bigger one, but he cost more money," said the wily Celestial.

"Oh! of course. Hang the expense. Trot it out, John."

Tin Wah obeyed, and Edgar saw that it was just what he wanted, large and stout; but John Jones uttered a cry, sprang forward and seized it.

"Whar you get dis envelope?" he demanded, facing Tin Wah.

The Chinaman looked frightened.

"Me buy him of Melican man," he said.

"No, you didn't; I've seen dat envelope afore. Know it like de nose on my face."

The negro was a good deal excited, but he suddenly calmed himself.

"Look-a-hyar, Tin Wah," he said, "I ain't mad at you for nuffin, an' I'll gib you a pile ob money to tell de trufe. You found dis envelope, didn't you? There was papers inside of it, too. I'll gib you lots ob dust to pass dem ober."

The Celestial was at first reluctant to admit anything, but, convinced at last, he produced a package of papers from under the counter, and John Jones was once more in possession of the precious documents with which he had journeyed to Sierra Flat.

Tin Wah explained the whole case. He had found the envelope and its contents in the stage where John had secreted it, but, unable to read, had no way of knowing that the papers were of value unless he took some "Melican man" into his confidence, which was against all the impulses of his cautious nature.

Thus were proved true the suspicions once expressed by Edgar Benson, that the package had fallen into the hands of some one who could not read.

Tin Wah, however, never let a chance slip to make money. The big envelope, being unsoiled, he could of course sell, and he had strong hopes that he would be able to find some liquid that would remove the writing from the other documents so that they could be utilized.

Luckily, though he had experimented, he had done no harm, and the papers were once more in the proper owner's hands.

The boy pards paid Tin Wah well, and then hastened to deliver them to Gypsy.

Meanwhile an excitement had sprung up in the town, for it was found that Horace Allenton had escaped from prison. All the guards lay insensible at their posts—drugged.

All? No, for one—Buck Brazer—was missing.

Then the truth began to dawn upon Lyman Higgins and the other ex-passengers of the stage. When that vehicle was stopped by Sancho Pedro, Allenton and Brazer, who seemed to be great fighting men, had been the first to show the white feather.

The cause was now plain.

Allenton learned that the papers were on their way to the Flat, but he could not learn who was the bearer. He had hired Sancho Pedro to waylay the stage, and with Brazer for an ally, he had himself taken passage to watch and work upon the other passengers.

Strout's cowardice had at first brought him under suspicion; no one looked seriously at the negro lad.

Nobody had suspected that Buck Brazer was mixed up with Allenton's affairs; he had been posted at the prison as one of the guards, and then he drugged his fellow-workers and freed his employer.

Sooner or later, judgment is pretty sure to come to the evil-doer. A week after the events last stated, two men, strangers, quarreled in a mining-camp twenty-five miles north of Sierra Flat. One shot the other, and then was himself hanged by Judge Lynch.

The assassinated man was Allenton, and the victim of the lynchers was Buck Brazer.

Gypsy Morrison had no trouble in proving her right to the immense property in Monterey county, and she was soon in possession. That was three years ago, and we have just received news of her marriage to Edgar Benson.

John Jones is their overseer.

We are happy to say that the wild life of our boy pards ended with the death of Sancho Pedro. They are now quiet but useful members of society, and we are sure that pretty Gypsy will never regret her choice.

The tame jaguar was never seen again by our friends. At times Gypsy thought of him and of the strange fancy which had for a time bound him to her, but he was not a safe pet to possess.

After the downfall of Sancho Pedro the citizens of Sierra Flat had no more trouble with road-agents, and they often say their good fortune was brought to them by the young Fighting Pards.

THE END.

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